The Unknown Seven

Harry Coverdale

Mrs. J. H. Probasco
Seal Rock, Oregon 1.75
1961

THE BOOK SHOP
ELKS BLD'G. - ABERDEEN, WASH.

Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2026

https://archive.org/details/unknownseven0000hary

THE UNKNOWN SEVEN

The Unknown Seven

A Detective Story

BY

HARRY COVERDALE

CHELSEA HOUSE
79 Seventh Avenue New York City

Copyright, 1923
By CHELSEA HOUSE

The Unknown Seven

(Printed in the United States of America)

All rights reserved, including that of translation into foreign languages, including the Scandinavian.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I.	The Woman in the Limousine	9
II.	Temptation	20
III.	The Temptress Speaks	36
IV.	"Yellow"	46
V.	Disguised	58
VI.	Doctor Latham	73
VII.	Cole Receives a Warning	85
VIII.	The Unknown Seven	94
IX.	The Red Light	106
X.	Pursuit	117
XI.	Behind the Locked Door	125
XII.	In Four Rounds	132
XIII.	The Morning's Mail	141
XIV.	Cole's Ruse	153
XV.	The Traitor Unmasked	171
XVI.	Gold	186
XVII.	In Room 2512	201
XVIII.	The Light in the Window	217
XIX.	A Warning	228

CHAPTER		PAGE
XX.	The Veneer of Intelligence	239
XXI.	The Face at the Window	256
XXII.	A Duel of Wits	265
XXIII.	The Seventh Ingredient	271
XXIV.	Cornered	280
XXV.	Face to Face	288
XXVI.	A Cry	299
XXVII.	The Way Out	309
XXVIII.	The Enemy Strikes	314

THE UNKNOWN SEVEN

CHAPTER I

THE WOMAN IN THE LIMOUSINE

STANDING in the dark doorway of a delicatessen shop, Kingdon Cole gazed, through the fog and drizzle of the October night, at a second-story window across the street. The brim of a slouch hat shaded his eyes and most of his face. His lean figure was draped in a mackintosh that reached almost to his feet. The upward slant of the cigar, clamped between his teeth, hinted at total absorption in what he saw.

The building that claimed his attention was an ordinary three-story structure of murky brick. Flanked by a warehouse on one side and a second-hand clothing store on the other, it presented a sullen and gloomy aspect to the watcher across the street. Yet there was something in the very drabness of the house and the chill atmosphere which hung over it that might have appealed to the imagination of a man like Kingdon Cole.

A man's head and shoulders were dimly silhouetted against the lighted window shade at which he was looking so fixedly. For half an hour or longer the figure had not stirred. The rigid poise of the head and the stiff set of the shoulders suggested that the man at the window was engaged in a task that occupied his whole mind.

Cole struck a match and, holding it in his cupped

hands, lighted his dead cigar. The flickering light shone for an instant on fingers that were long, slim, and finely tapering, the fingers of a man of great mental energy and a compelling personality.

"Wonder what the learned Professor Carmody finds so interesting," he mumbled. "Some scientific treatise, very likely, or perhaps it is——"

He lowered his gaze, as he vaguely sensed that a pair of eyes was trying to pierce the gloom in which he stood. What with the wet night and the lateness of the hour that dreary section of Bleecker Street was all but deserted. Now and then a crosstown car jogged along at a lumbering pace; occasionally a taxicab passed on its way.

Cole looked up and down the block. The impression was more distinct now. Some one was watching him, just as he was watching the solitary figure in the window. His senses, sharpened by long training, told him he was under observation even before he could trace the impression to its source. Now he saw a limousine drawn up at the corner, less than twenty paces from where he stood. Its sides of burnt sienna gleamed in the blurred lights. It seemed to lend a touch of affluence to the squalor and dreariness of the scene. How long the car had been there he did not know, for the window across the street had claimed all his attention.

The car began to move, crawling, snaillike and silent toward the point where Cole stood. It stopped opposite the doorway that sheltered him. He fancied that he saw the flicker of a face behind the curtains. Then the door opened a few inches, and he caught a glimpse of a beckoning hand.

His eyes narrowed under their puckering brows. The monotony of his vigil was being broken in a strange way, and the slow twisting of his lips signified that the interruption was not altogether displeasing. Once more he glanced up at the window across the street, noticing that the shadowy figure had not stirred. Then he crossed the sidewalk, and instantly the door of the limousine was flung wide.

"Won't you step in, Mr. Cole?" asked a voice.

Though his life had inured him to surprises, Cole started a little. It was odd that the occupant of the car should address him by name. The interior was dark, but in the shadows he saw the figure of a woman.

"You are very patient, Mr. Cole," the voice continued. "You are wasting your time, however. It isn't likely that Professor Carmody will go out tonight, so you might as well jump in."

A sharp hunching of Cole's shoulders registered surprise number two. It was all very mystifying. Not only did the occupant of the car know his name, but she seemed familiar with his business as well. He liked her voice, a deep soprano with a faintly playful undertone. For a moment he studied the long, slender lines of her figure, faintly discernible in the dusk and melting, here and there, into a background of saffron-hued cushions.

"You hesitate? I happen to know that Professor Carmody is in for the night and that your vigilance is useless."

Cole looked at her intently. The mist, the drizzle, and the blurred sheen from the street lamps seemed

to lend a touch of unreality to what he saw and heard.

"What do you know about Professor Carmody," he demanded.

"A great deal more than you do. It's quite possible that I am in a position to give you some valuable information. At any rate my car is more comfortable than a dark doorway."

She leaned forward slightly, and there was a trace of mockery on her faintly parted lips. "Not afraid, are you, Mr. Cole?"

He gave a low laugh at the implied dare. With a shrug he stepped inside the car and sat down beside her. She picked up the speaking tube and, turning her head away from Cole, said something which he could not hear. In an instant the car was in motion.

"You seem to know a great deal," he observed, trying to obtain a glimpse of her face under the billowing brim that shaded it.

"And you are anxious to learn how much more I know. Isn't it so, Mr. Cole? It was neither vulgar curiosity nor adventurousness that prompted you to accept my invitation to ride with me. You accepted only because you hoped to learn something. Having heard me speak your name and mention Professor Carmody you naturally thought it might be profitable to cultivate my acquaintance."

"Perhaps so," said Cole dryly. "What do you know about me aside from my name and my interest in the estimable professor?"

"A great deal," was the surprisingly prompt reply. "You are a student of criminology, a follower in the

footsteps of Lombroso, Pinel, and Prichard, though you by no means accept their theories. You have written two books on crime and criminals. They are too scientific for the general reader, I have been told, but experts on the subject regard them as authoritative. Perhaps some day I shall try to read them."

"I fear you won't find them very interesting," replied Cole. "What else?"

"You live in a small apartment in Gramercy Park, which also serves as your office. Two years ago you did a very brilliant piece of work on the Wilmerding murder case, though you magnanimously, or for reasons of your own, let the police claim the credit for the results. You follow criminal investigations largely as a scientific pursuit. If you cared to devote all your time to it you could make a great success, but you accept only such cases as happen to interest you personally. As a result you lead a quiet and somewhat precarious existence, deriving your sole pleasure from your work and such inexpensive amusements as books, music, and, on rare occasions, the theater."

"You seem to have taken considerable pains looking me up," he remarked.

"Oh, I haven't told you all I know yet. I have learned a number of things about your private life and personal habits, but we needn't go into those things now."

"Are you equally well informed in regard to Professor Carmody?"

"Not quite. The professor is a riddle. To all outward appearances he is interested in nothing but

his experiments and his musty old books. He seems to be living in that kind of neighborhood by preference, because he isn't so apt to be bothered by meddling neighbors. His house is said to contain one of the best-equipped laboratories of its kind in the world. That's only a rumor, of course. The professor doesn't encourage visitors. To the few people who have talked with him he is what the novelists call a man of mystery. He comes and goes without speaking to any one, and his life is a closed book. As far as I know, only one person has been inside his house in a year, and that person never came out."

"Oh, you know that!"

"Yes, I am one of the very few who are aware of the fact. Let me see, it's about three weeks since Malcolm Reeves disappeared. His relatives, your clients, in other words, have reason to believe that he visited Professor Carmody on the night of his disappearance. No wonder the case fascinates you, Mr. Cole. Disappearances are always interesting, but especially so when a mysterious person like Professor Carmody is involved."

Cole regarded her in frank amazement, but her head was now slightly bowed, and all he could see of her face was the curve of the chin.

"The relatives did well to put the case in your hands," she went on. "You are both capable and discreet and, as I presume you know, there were excellent reasons for not reporting Reeves' disappearance to the police. Are you making satisfactory progress?"

"My clients seem satisfied."

"You have not yet paid the professor a visit?"

"What would be the use?"

"You are right, of course. It would only put him on his guard. You prefer not to let him know that he is under suspicion." She laughed gently, as if amused at something. "Besides, it is doubtful whether a search of Carmody's house would reveal any clews to Reeves' fate. The professor is a chemist, and I understand there are certain chemical processes by which bodies can be made to disappear completely, leaving no trace."

"Then you think Reeves has been murdered?"

"Don't you?" she asked quickly.

Cole smiled. Instead of answering the question he asked another. "How can you be so sure that Carmody will not leave his house to-night?"

"Because he has the best of reasons for staying in."

"What are they?"

"One is that his engagement for to-night was canceled by telephone at four o'clock this afternoon."

Cole gave her a puzzled stare. "How do you know that?"

She laughed a little. "There are ways of finding out," she said mysteriously. "Tapped wires, for instance. But the professor's principal reason for staying in to-night is that he is well aware that you are watching him. You see, Mr. Cole, he has more shrewdness than you have been giving him credit for. And the fact that he is staying in on your account shows that he has great respect for your ability."

She had raised her head a trifle, and Cole gave her a long, bewildered glance. He half expected to see a smile on her lips, but her face was grave.

"Are you one of Reeves' relatives?" he asked abruptly.

"Oh, no!"

"Then how——"

"I have certain sources of information. Sources so vast that you would be staggered if I were to tell you of them. Please don't look at me like that. I am not insane, neither am I subject to hallucinations. The fact that I happen to know more about the Carmody case than you do is no reflection on your ability as an investigator. It merely shows that your equipment is inadequate. Care to hear more?"

"What else do you know?"

"I know that the case you are working on is only one minor angle of a vast mystery. The disappearance of Malcolm Reeves is nothing but an incident. Reeves himself was only an insignificant puppet in one of the greatest games ever played. All you have seen so far is one of the minor threads in the woof. I am always mixing my metaphors, but I know you won't mind. Mr. Cole, this affair has ramifications that may some day rock the whole continent."

"I feel considerably shaken up already," admitted Cole. "You realize, of course, that you are using strong words?"

"No stronger than the situation demands."

"If it is as bad as all that why doesn't somebody put a stop to it?"

"Because——" She checked herself and regarded him intently. "Well, because the man who is big enough for the task has not yet been found."

Again Cole cast a glance at the window. The car had made several turns in the last few minutes. He caught only a blurred view of his surroundings, but he thought they were traversing one of the cavernlike streets near the southern tip of Manhattan Island.

"Have you heard enough?" she asked.

"Just enough to give me an appetite for more."

"In that case you must trust me implicitly and obey me without questions. I am taking desperate chances in confiding in you, Mr. Cole, and certain precautions are absolutely necessary. Will you promise me on your honor that you will not try to ascertain the location of the place I shall take you to?"

Cole considered. There was a flavor of mystery about the adventure that appealed to him, but the prospect of learning something more about the Carmody case was an even greater temptation. From what little the woman had so far told him he surmised that she must have unusual sources of information. Much that she had said coincided with what he already knew, so he had no cause to doubt her truthfulness.

"You have my promise," he told her.

The car made another turn, swung down a dark block, then veered again to the south. Cole caught a hazy glimpse of dark, towering skyscrapers.

The woman looked at him fixedly, as if in doubt. "I believe you are a man of your word, Mr. Cole, but promises are sometimes broken in spite of the best intentions. Please don't be offended."

She produced a scarf and with a deft touch covered his eyes, securing the bandage with a firm knot at the back. Cole chuckled amusedly. He might be walking into a trap, but it would not be the first time, and he had great confidence in his ability to take care of himself in any situation that might come up.

After continuing its zigzagging course a few minutes longer the car stopped. His mysterious conductress touched his arm as they stepped out. She guided him across the sidewalk and up a few stone steps, and then they traversed what appeared to be a long corridor. Finally Cole found himself in a narrow inclosure which he guessed to be an elevator.

"We are in one of the tallest office buildings in New York," the woman whispered in his ear, "but you're not likely to guess its name."

The door clanked shut, and the cage shot swiftly upward. Cole felt a rush of wind in his ears. He maintained a languid composure, but inwardly he marveled. A modern skyscraper was the last place he would have expected the woman to take him to. He tried to estimate the number of floors they were passing. Five, ten, fifteen, twenty——

Still the cage darted upward, and then it stopped so suddenly that he caught his breath sharply. They stepped out, and the girl removed the scarf from his eyes. He gazed around him bewilderedly. All about him, with the exception of a single elevator

shaft was a vast expanse of blank wall. There was no sign of doors or windows, and the only illumination was a small electric bulb in the ceiling.

"We came up in a private elevator," the woman explained. "This is the top floor. To the public at large and to most of the tenants of the building it practically does not exist. This way, Mr Cole."

She stepped to one of the corners of the triangular space, of which the elevator shaft formed the center, and Cole followed. In the dim light he could not see exactly what happened, but the woman's hand went out and then a narrow portion of the wall slid back. Thep stepped through an aperture, and instantly the opening closed behind them. They were in a long corridor with doors on each side.

"Surprised?" she asked, starting to lead him down the hall.

"Rather. Never expected to find such mysterious contrivances in a modern office building."

Her only reply was a low laugh. The floor of the corridor was luxuriously carpeted; the doors on either side had a solid appearance. Cole's amazement grew. He wondered what was beyond the massive doors and what was the nature of this establishment that was hidden behind blank walls. He had little time for speculation, for his companion opened a door and bade him enter.

"Excuse me, Mr. Cole," she murmured when she had switched on the light. "I shall be back directly."

The door closed, and she was gone. Alone, Cole looked about him, and his eyes opened wide in astonishment.

CHAPTER II

TEMPTATION

FOR a moment Cole forgot that he was in a building devoted to the pursuits of commerce. The room in which he stood, bordered by walls of paneled walnut, was worthy of a Fifth Avenue mansion. It struck him as a bit grotesque. From an elevator he had stepped, through a blank wall, into a magnificence that fairly dazzled him. It was like an "Arabian Nights" adventure. As he looked about him he saw quiet elegance everywhere, without a taint of showiness. For some time he stood lost in admiration, then he noticed that the room had no windows. A moment later he discovered that the door was locked on the outside. Despite the splendor that surrounded him he was virtually a prisoner.

He sat down and smoked a cigarette, waiting for his strange conductress to return. Evidently the walls were solidly built, for no sounds reached him. The air was fresh and pure despite the absence of windows, hinting that there was a concealed ventilator somewhere in the room.

The armchair was comfortable, and he stretched out his lean figure, slightly short of six feet. The man suggested mental force rather than bodily strength, but a great surprise awaited any antagonist who underestimated Cole's physical prowess. He was far stronger than the average man, and his

endurance was phenomenal. His gray eyes, with a faint humorous twinkle in their depths, were fixed on the door. His dark face, slightly lined about the mouth and the outer corner of the eyes, bore a look of mild expectancy. In moments of repose he looked as though he had not a care in the world. His friends often wondered how he managed to maintain the freshness and sparkle suggestive of a recent needle shower. Perhaps it was because he was thoroughly in love with his work and had earned to shake off the minor frets and irritations of life.

In the midst of his musings the door opened, and he stared rather rudely at the vision that entered. It was the woman, and she had undergone an amazing transformation since he last saw her. He wondered whether the shimmering gown she wore had been designed by Poiret himself. Its delicate rose color afforded a charming contrast to her complexion, a sort of luminous white that somehow escaped being pale. Standing there, with a faint smile on her lips, her face fringed by an aureole of fine-spun gold, she was easily the most bewitching woman Cole had ever seen.

He rose, bowed, and gazed appreciatively at the simple, but strikingly effective, ornament she wore at her throat.

"Sorry to have kept you waiting," she murmured. "Sit down, please, and smoke as much as you like. I want to talk with you."

Cole sat down. He wondered if she had arrayed herself like this for the sole purpose of having a talk with him.

"You promised to tell me something more about the Carmody case," he reminded her. "I suppose you brought me to this charming place so that we might have a quiet talk without danger of interruption or eavesdropping."

She sat down a short distance from him. By degrees the smile faded from her lips. A curiously solemn expression crept into her face. "Haven't I told you enough, Mr. Cole?"

"What little you told me was only a provocation. It gave me a taste for more. By the way, you have the advantage over me. Won't you tell me your name?"

"You may call me Miss Brown."

"The name doesn't fit you," he objected.

"Names never do fit. That's one of the ironies of existence. For the present, until we know each other better, it will have to be Miss Brown. I had to tell you a little about the Carmody case in order to get your attention. I hope I convinced you that it is quite useless for you to continue at work on a case that is so enormous in scope and presents such insuperable difficulties, Mr. Cole." A pleading note had come into her voice. "Can anything persuade you to drop the Carmody case?"

She bent forward a little. With hands clasped across her knee, she studied him intently, and Cole looked into the deepest, bluest eyes he had ever seen.

"Drop the Carmody case!" he exclaimed.

"You must drop it, Mr. Cole! If you knew more about it, what terrible things you are going up against, you would willingly drop it without

further argument. You would recognize your utter helplessness in the matter, not to mention a number of other things."

Cole was momentarily speechless. He found himself strangely impressed by her big, sorcerous eyes, full of mute pleading and entreaty.

"I don't understand. You don't realize what you are saying. Why should I drop the case?"

"Because of the things I have told you."

Cole laughed. "They are only an added incentive for me to go on with it."

She drew a long breath. "That's your man's way of looking at things. The greater the dangers and difficulties the more determined you are to forge ahead. You don't stop to consider the price, or estimate the cost. The wreckage you scatter about you means nothing to you. All you think of is the gratification of your boundless ambition. Mr. Cole, won't you forgo your foolish pride and do what I ask?"

Her eyes held him despite his will. There was a look of terror in their depths that exerted a subtle appeal upon him. He got to his feet and tried to shake off the fascination of her beauty and her magnetic personality.

"Impossible," he declared. "If you brought me here in the hope of inducing me to drop the Carmody case, your time and effort are wasted."

"Please, Mr. Cole! Forget that you ever heard of this terrible case. Tell your clients in the morning that you will have nothing further to do with it."

"That wouldn't alter matters. They would

promptly accept my resignation and engage somebody else."

"There is only oue Kingdon Cole."

"That's a very neat compliment, but it won't bear analysis. I haven't accomplished anything very wonderful, and another man could finish what I have begun."

She was silent for a time, her big, luminous eyes regarding him imploringly. "If you won't drop the case for your own sake, because of the terrible dangers involved, then I beg you to do so for my sake."

"For your sake? Really, Miss—er—Brown, I don't understand. What is your interest in the Carmody case?"

She stepped up and clutched his hand. The touch of her fingers sent a thrill through him. Her eyes were moist, and the curve beneath her throat rose and fell with accelerated rhythm. "Yes, for my sake. I can't explain, except to say that awful things will happen to me if you go on. Death would be as nothing in comparison. Doesn't a woman's soul mean anything to you, Mr. Cole?"

Cole looked down into her eyes, while her fingers spasmodically clutched his hand. Far into their blue depths he gazed, and suddenly his face underwent a change. His lips curled a trifle, and a hard glint came into his eyes. Somewhat roughly he released his hand.

"Very touching," he dryly remarked, "but I don't see the connection between the Carmody case and a woman's soul."

She drew back with a little sob of bafflement.

"If you meant your own soul, Miss Brown, you mentioned something that doesn't exist," he went on sarcastically. "Trickery and pretense are poor substitutes for soul."

"What do you mean?"

He shrugged disgustedly. "Your acting is superb, but it don't bear close inspection. You were splendid at a little distance. Despite the fact that I am the only Kingdon Cole, as you so charmingly phrased it, I am rather susceptible to the tears of a beautiful woman. With your sobs and your loveliness you could have melted a stone, if such a feat were possible. As soon as I got a close view of you, however, I knew you were only shamming. Your eyes gave you away when you sprung that choice line about a woman's soul. Perhaps you realized you were laying the pathos on too thick. Anyway the illusion is shattered, and all that remains is the gorgeous gown you are wearing. It is really stunning."

"Thank you," she said coldly, dropping the rôle she had been playing, as easily as she would a wrap. "No doubt I should have known better than to try such methods on you."

"Yes, you should," said Cole. "For, despite the little slip you made, I believe that you are really a very clever woman. Now that we are off the subject of women's souls won't you tell me your real reason for wishing to throw up the Carmody case?"

She shook her head, but he thought he detected a gleam of unwilling admiration in her eyes. Motioning him to follow, she stepped to the door and

opened it, then preceded him down the hall. Cole guessed that his little adventure was over, and he felt a twinge of disappointment at the thought that, in all probability, he would never learn the meaning of her puzzling behavior. No doubt she would try to blindfold him again before conducting him away from the place, and he was prepared to raise strenuous objections.

But it appeared Miss Brown was not yet ready to let him go. She stopped before one of the massive doors that had already excited his curiosity, and knocked twice. It opened quickly and noiselessly. In a moment, before he realized what he was doing, Cole was inside, and the door closed at his back.

The room was so dimly lighted that at first he could distinguish nothing but bare, gloomy walls. Miss Brown, who had followed him into the room, hastened forward and seemed to melt away in the dusk, leaving him to wonder what new turn his adventure was taking. Gradually, as his eyes grew accustomed to the gloom, he was able to see objects with some degree of clearness. He was in a long, narrow room, and what he saw was in keeping with the other strange things that he had witnessed and experienced in this surprising establishment.

A number of shadowy figures were seated around a circular table in the center of the room. He counted seven of them, and at first he had a ludicrous impression that there were only blank spaces where their faces should have been. Then, as his pupils continued to respond to the strain im-

posed by the dim light, he saw that each man wore a mask. It was only a strip of cloth, with tiny slits over the eyes, but in the dusk it was the only covering that was needed to make recognition impossible.

Again Cole was struck with a sense of unreality. The men, sitting stiffly erect in their chairs, caused him to wonder whether he was in the midst of some ghostly séance. He felt their eyes searching him through the vents in the masks. The gloom and the silence gave an added illusory touch to the scene. Cole had to shake himself before he could realize that he was on the top floor of a modern skyscraper.

Miss Brown stepped behind one of the chairs and held a brief whispered conversation with its occupant. The latter nodded, and the girl slipped away toward the door. A moment later it closed behind her, and the man, with whom she had been talking, indicated that Cole was to step forward. With a shrug he complied, and the masked faces stirred slightly as he approached. For a full minute nothing was said, and again he felt the sharp and steady scrutiny of seven pairs of eyes. Finally the man who had beckoned him spoke. "Mr. Cole, how much will you take to drop the Carmody case?"

Cole could not help but laugh. The words, spoken with a directness and a matter-of-factness that left nothing to the imagination, had shattered the illusion completely. In an instant the spell of unreality was broken. He knew he was dealing with practical men who were in the habit of reducing everything to terms of dollars and cents. A blunt reply came

to his lips, but his desire to learn more of these strange men caused him to hold it back.

"Suppose we put all the cards on the table," he suggested. "I don't like to talk business in the dark. Who are you, and what is your objection to my connection with the Carmody case?"

"We are not here to answer questions," declared the one who seemed to be acting as spokesman for the others. "All I care to say is that, because of a peculiar combination of circumstances, it is to our advantage to pay you liberally for withdrawing from the case. What's your price, Mr. Cole?"

Under ordinary circumstances, Cole would have been indignant at this cool assumption that every man has his price, but now his dominant emotion was curiosity. He could not understand why they seemed so intent upon persuading him to sever his connection with the affair, but what Miss Brown had said about the vast ramifications of the Carmody case suggested that they had ample reasons for what they were doing.

"Let me get this straight," he said evenly. "You are willing to pay me my price for withdrawing from the Carmody case. Are there any strings to the proposition?"

The other chuckled dryly. "I wouldn't call them strings, exactly. They are only gossamer threads. In addition to retiring from the case you are to give us a full and veracious report of what you have discovered to date in connection with the disappearance of Malcolm Reeves."

"I see," said Cole. "Anything else?"

"Just one thing more. In addition to withdraw-

ing from your present connection with the case and turning the information you possess over to us, you are to come over to our side and put your ability at our disposal. We are ready to pay you handsomely for your services, either on a contingent basis, or in the form of a weekly salary."

"Very generous," decared Cole, with a faint trace of sarcasm. "Your proposition is that, for a consideration, I am to betray my present clients and——"

"Betray is a harsh word," objected the spokesman for the group.

"Truthful terms are usually harsh," Cole remarked. "Let's not quibble over words. In addition to the amount, which you are willing to pay me for betraying my clients, you offer to reward me liberally for certain services that you require. May I ask what they are?"

"You will learn soon enough if you accept our proposition. Let me state that we have unlimited funds at our disposal and stand ready to pay you well. It would be no exaggeration to say that in a short time you should be a rich man if you accept our offer. In view of our liberality don't you think it behooves you to be less squeamish and ask fewer questions?"

"I suppose it is in deucedly bad taste for me to argue with a man who offers me a fortune on a silver platter," Cole admitted. "Just the same I can't help wondering why you are offering such a glittering bribe to one who is practically unknown in his profession."

The man gave an amused chuckle. "Don't worry

about that, Mr. Cole. We are not in the habit of buying pigs in a poke. You have been under observation for some time."

"So I gathered from what the bewitching Miss—Brown told me."

"We have learned that you have a great deal of ability. You are fearless and persevering. You have qualities that the average professional detective sadly lacks, such as tact, polish, and a magnetic personality. In short, you are precisely the kind of man we need. We have reason to believe that you have discovered certain interesting facts in connection with Malcolm Reeves' disappearance, facts which would naturally become our property if you came over to our side."

Cole marveled at the extent of the man's knowledge. It was true that he had picked up several stray facts which, when considered in conjunction with the known circumstances of Reeves' disappearance, made a fairly interesting showing. His glance wandered over the circle of veiled faces. Each of the seven men was watching him intently through the slits in his mask.

"We are waiting for your decision, Mr. Cole," remarked the spokesman after a pause. "If our proposition appeals to you, name your price."

Cole pretended to hesitate. He hoped to learn a little more before he closed the interview. He wondered how far these men would go in their efforts to induce him to betray his clients and transfer his allegiance to themselves. "Aren't you forgetting something?" he asked. "Do you realize

that a man who has been bought once will probably sell himself again?"

Though he could not see, he fancied the spokesman's eyes were twinkling behind the mask.

"We have considered everything, Mr. Cole. You wouldn't sell yourself except to a higher bidder, and it isn't likely any one will outbid us. If such a situation should arise, however, we would know how to handle it. What is your price?"

"Suppose you name the price you are willing to pay?"

There was a craning of necks, and nods and subdued whispers passed around the circle. Evidently the seven construed his words as meaning that he was yielding. The spokesman unlocked a drawer in front of him and placed a small package on the table.

"Twenty-five thousand dollars," he remarked impressively. "If you are in doubt as to the amount, or if you suspect that I am handing you stage money, you will be permitted to examine it in the light."

He handed the package to Cole. "Remember that this is only your retaining fee, so to speak. There will be lots more coming to you if you decide to throw in your lot with us."

Cole felt the crisp fiber of the bills. He did not doubt that the money was genuine or that the package contained the exact amount mentioned by the spokesman. Whatever else these men might do, he did not think they would stoop to petty cheating. An odd sensation surged through him as he weighed the currency in the palm of his hand. It was more

money than had ever before come within his reach. Of a sudden he remembered some of the things he had been compelled to deny himself because of his slender and uncertain income. Until this moment, when he held the wherewithal in his hand, it had not occurred to him that he was missing any of the good things in life. He had accepted his privations, as a matter of course, with a smile or a shrug, according to his mood of the moment.

For a few seconds longer he gave himself over to thrill of possession, and then he tossed the bundle of currency down on the table. "It isn't enough," he declared.

A chorus of murmurs went around the circular table. The veiled faces strained forward a little. Once again Cole fancied the spokesman's eyes were twinkling through the orifices in the mask.

"Splendid, Mr. Cole," said the man approvingly. "I didn't think twenty-five thousand would satisfy you, but I wanted to make sure. As a matter of fact, if you had accepted such a paltry amount, we would have broken off the negotiations instantly. We don't want a man who holds himself cheap. Here"—again he opened the drawer in front of him—"is another twenty-five thousand. That makes fifty. Quite a neat sum for a man whose income last year was only a trifle over four thousand."

"How did you know that?"

"Income-tax reports," said the man.

Cole took one bundle of currency in each hand. He was no longer marveling at the surprising sources of information that seemed to be open to these men. For the moment all his senses were

centered on the wealth that lay in his palms. A flash of self-revelation came to him, and he was surprised and frightened by it. He had never known that mere money could give him such a delectable sensation. In the past, as a passive onlooker, he had smiled tolerantly at other men's scramble for wealth. With philosophic eyes he had watched the money-mad procession sweep by him. Now he found that the sheer touch of the currency sent a contagion through his veins, awakening strange emotions within him.

The sensation put an indefinable fear into him, fear of himself and the weakness he had just discovered. Of a sudden the currency seemed to scorch his palms. He shrugged, and the spell was broken. With an inward paroxysm he flung the money down on the table. "Not even that is enough," he announced in slightly dazed tones, like one just awakening from a dream.

The spokesman's head came up a little. With a shrug and an indistinct mutter he once more opened the drawer, but Cole laid a detaining hand on his sleeve.

"Wait!" he said quietly. "You are going ahead on the idea that every man has his price. You're mistaken. There isn't money enough in the whole United States treasury to buy me."

There came a hush, and then a ripple of commotion went around the table. It died instantly as the spokesman raised a silencing hand. He tilted his head back, and through the holes in the mask his eyes bored into Cole's face. For a time not a sound was heard in the room. Finally the spokes-

man gave a short, contemptuous laugh. "I see," he declared. "You're a weakling like most men. You're a slave to the absurd thing we call conscience. I had hoped that you were one of the rare exceptions."

"Wrong again," said Cole, smiling. "It isn't conscience. Anyway, I wouldn't call it that. It is only pride, a foolish pride, perhaps. I want to go through life knowing that I can look every man straight in the eye and tell him to go to the devil if necessary. I couldn't do that if I were to sell myself. I should become a despicable thing in my own eyes, and life wouldn't be worth living after that. I don't suppose you understand, but that's just how I feel."

Seven pairs of eyes were leveled at Cole's face as his short, crisp sentences fell on the tense air. Then came silence, a long and oddly vibrant silence during which Cole experienced an unaccountable feeling that his life hung in the balance. He could neither understand it nor trace it to its source, but the nameless sense of danger grew more distinct with every moment.

By instinct his hand went to the hip pocket in which he always carried a small, but reliable, pistol. Before his hands could touch the weapon a strange thing happened. The spokesman's arm described a slight movement in the dusk, and in a twinkling utter darkness fell. Cole stood in blackness so intense that it seemed as though he could touch it.

His fingers found the handle of the pistol, but in the next instant his hand fell to his side. In that impenetrable darkness the weapon was of no more

avail than a toy. He heard a faint scraping of chairs, then a patter of feet. He groped for the chair where the spokesman had sat, but it was empty. Gradually the faint sounds ceased, and then came an engulfing silence. It was as if every manifestation of life had been drained out of the blackness that surrounded him.

Silence—darkness—solitude. Cole, as he dropped into the spokesman's chair, felt as if the three words had suddenly acquired a new and more powerful significance.

CHAPTER III

THE TEMPTRESS SPEAKS

FIVE minutes passed. Cole could no longer control his restlessness. He got up from the chair and went gropingly across the heavily carpeted floor. His footsteps made scarcely a sound, and he had a queer sensation that the darkness and silence were insinuating themselves into his very pores. It was as if a magic spell had fallen over him. He could no longer trust his reason or his senses.

He stopped short as a faint whisper went through the dead silence. With head thrown back and straining his ears, he listened. Again the whisper came, trailing through the blackness like a disembodied breath. He groped in the direction whence the sound came, and now he could hear it quite distinctly.

"Mr. Cole!"

Tracing the sound vibrations, he crossed the floor and brought up against the wall. Again his name was spoken, and now he had an impression that the speaker was only a few feet away. He thought he recognized the voice.

"Mr. Cole!"

His highly sensitized ears gauged and dissected each small fraction of a syllable. He knew he was not mistaken. The voice belonged to the woman who had introduced herself by the absurdly inappropriate name of Miss Brown.

"Where are you?" he asked. He fumbled with his hands in the dark, but found nothing but emptiness. He turned and ran his fingers up and down the wall until he encountered a metallic object imbedded in the paneling. Again his name was called, and he gave a short laugh as he realized that the sounds were coming to him through the mouthpiece of a speaking tube. The touch of the cold metal against his fingers seemed to shatter an illusion. Simple though the contrivance was, it smacked of up-to-dateness. A sense of reality broke the spell which the weird events of the night had cast over him.

"Hello," he spoke into the mouthpiece. "You, Miss Brown?"

A brief pause, and then her voice came to him in hurried tones that bespoke intense excitement. "Yes, Mr. Cole. I must warn you. I feel responsible for your predicament. Awful things will happen if you persist in your headstrong course. You must abandon it and accept the proposition that was made to you. Otherwise——"

Her voice quavered and broke. The suspended sentence and the words she had left unspoken impressed Cole grimly. He could almost see her, white and shuddering at the other end of the speaking tube. Though he knew she was a clever actress, there was an earnestness in her tones that gave him pause.

"You mean these men will kill me unless I accept their vile terms?" he asked.

"Oh, they will do worse than that! They are terrible men, Mr. Cole, and they are in a desperate

temper. Death, a hundred deaths, would be preferable to the thing they intend doing. Won't you come to your senses before it's too late? Oh, please——"

Cole laughed into the mouthpiece. "Compose yourself, Miss Brown. Don't worry on my account. I've been in tight corners before, and I always wriggled out of them somehow. I shall do so this time."

A sob sounded at the other end, and then all was quiet. Cole drew away from the speaking tube. It might have been only another bit of clever acting, but Miss Brown's warning had left him in a state of tingling suspense. She had hinted at dire things that were to happen to him, and Cole tried to tell himself that she had only been exercising her imagination. Such things belonged in the realm of romance and melodrama. It was laughable to think that they might happen on the top floor of a skyscraper, located close to the world's financial nerve center. The incongruity of it struck Cole as quite amusing.

He chuckled, but in the next instant he sharply caught his breath. A sound resembling that of a clicking lock reached his ears. He heard nothing more, but he had a feeling that some one had entered the room, that he was no longer alone. Instinctively he braced himself to resist an attack. His ears were keyed to catch the slightest sound; every muscle in his body had the tension of a cocked trigger.

He stood with his back against the wall, all his senses quiveringly alert. He could neither hear

nor see, but he knew some one was steadily approaching from the farther end of the long room. Presently he could hear sounds of breathing, but the prowler's progress was still muffled by the heavy carpet. Now a little thud signified that the intruder had walked up against the circular table, so he could be no more than a few feet from where Cole stood. The fact that he could not see who it was that was coming toward him made the suspense nerve-racking.

Suddenly he thought of matches. He searched his pockets, but the little case in which he usually carried them was empty. Somewhere in the room there must be an electric-light switch, but it was not likely he could find it in the dark.

He peered sharply into the blackness. Now his ears caught a pawing sound, like that of some one crawling on hands and knees. He bent forward a little, shoulders squared, for he knew the prowler was only a foot or two away. Evidently he hoped Cole was unaware of his entrance and expected to take his victim by surprise.

A fumbling hand swept Cole's knees, and he kicked out his foot with great force, foiling the attempt to trip him. A startled yell testified to the effectiveness of the kick, but in the next instant Cole knew that his adversary had risen to his feet and was changing his tactics. His fist struck out, but it landed on a body hard and firm as rock, and the only apparent result of the blow was a stinging sensation in his knuckles. He tried to strike again, but now his shoulders were seized in a powerful grip

that pinned his arms to his side and rendered him helpless.

His mind worked quickly, while the enormous weight of his adversary bore him down. Evidently he was a huge man, and his arms were hard as flails. Even if Cole's hands had been free, his fists would have made no stronger impression on the man's body than on a wall of brick. Though nimbler and more wiry than his opponent, Cole knew he could not match him in brute strength and physical endurance. His only hope lay in releasing his arms and, striking at the fellow's face, batter him into insensibility.

He writhed and wriggled in the powerful embrace of the gigantic arms, resisting the downward pressure till he felt as if his spine must snap. Inch by inch his opponent was bending him to his knees, and all the while his arms felt as if they were caught between metal springs. In vain he put every ounce of strength into the struggle; the mountainous body of his adversary was constantly forcing him downward. Already his knees were touching the floor, and his neck felt as if it were being gradually wrenched out of shape.

His breath grew weak and fluttering. His heart pounded against his ribs like a trip hammer. In the blackness tiny specks whirled before his eyes. He knew the struggle must end soon, and the realization seemed to kindle a flame within him. An idea shot like a flash through his reeling mind.

Suddenly he grew limp in the sturdy arms of his opponent. With a grunt of satisfaction the latter let go his hold, and Cole lay flat and inert

on his back. For a few moments he drank huge gulps of air into his straining lungs. Then, with the elastic swiftness of a spring suddenly released, he leaped to his feet. With one hand he located his adversary, with the other he drove a savage blow straight into the man's face.

A short cry of pain and rage broke from the other's lips. His hands fumbled at Cole's throat for a strangle hold, but the merciless hammering of the latter's fists drove him steadily backward. Whenever his fingers tightened around Cole's windpipe a rain of smashing blows to nose and mouth forced him to relax his hold and retreat a little farther toward the wall. Cole, his strength electrified by the joy of battle, did not notice that his knuckles were bruised. Time and again, with a sureness of aim that surprised himself, he drove them into the other's torn and mangled face. Already a stertorous breathing told that his adversary was becoming groggy. Cole summoned all his strength for a final knock-out blow.

He flung his arm backward, and in the same instant the other uttered a loud yell. Cole cut it short with a crashing thrust of his fist. With a gasp his opponent went to the floor. For a moment he gave himself over to the thrill of victory, but in the next instant he was all alertness. A faint click signified that the door had opened, and now several pairs of feet were stealing swiftly across the floor.

Cole whirled around on his heels, but a stalwart form collided with him, nearly sweeping him off his feet. Another hurled himself upon him from

behind, and a third jerked his legs from under him. With a sharp sense of bafflement, Cole fell headlong to the floor. He struck out with hands and feet, fighting with desperate vehemence, determined to inflict all the injury he could on his opponents.

But he was outnumbered three to one, and something of his strength had been spent in the earlier encounter. Defiantly he met the onslaught, but he was overpowered by numbers. Eventually they laid him on his back, and then his adversaries shackled his hands and feet with stout cord. He thought they were handling him with strange gentleness, and he wondered if they were saving him for another ordeal. He remembered, as he was picked up and carried, that Miss Brown had said something about a fate worse than a hundred deaths.

In silence the little procession passed through a door, and presently Cole was placed on a cot. In a few moments the men walked out, and once more he was left alone in impenetrable darkness. Not a word had been spoken by his captors, and he had not obtained a single glimpse of their faces. The whole episode had been enacted in silence and under cover of darkness.

The door opened just as his mind was shaking off the numbness that had seized it when he fell. Some one walked up to the cot where he lay. For a few moments no sound was heard save the slow breathing of the two men. Finally the other spoke, and Cole recognized the voice of the one who had acted as spokesman for the group around the circular table.

"You're an obstinate man, Mr. Cole. We have

made you a very flattering proposition, and you have seen fit to reject it. I have come to offer you one more chance to comply with our wishes."

"And if I refuse," said Cole evenly, "you will kill me, I suppose. I am beginning to think you are quite capable of it."

"Oh, no!" The other man laughed softly. "We know you are not the kind of man that's afraid of death. Something stronger than fear for your life is needed to bend you to our will. But we will bend you sooner or later. Make no mistake about that."

The words were spoken in a tone of calm assurance that impressed Cole against his will.

"How, if I may ask?"

"By a form of persuasion that is far more powerful than the fear of death. After all, death is nothing. Only a dip into a void. A little suffering, perhaps, and then nothingness. There are things that are far worse. Mr. Cole, did you ever stop to consider what your life would amount to if you should suddenly lose your mind?"

"What?" Cole gave an involuntary shudder.

"Suppose that keen mind of yours should become a blank. Suppose that your wonderful mental faculties were to desert you, that you were to become a leering, tottering wretch, inspiring loathing and horror in your fellow men. Can you picture such a fate, Mr. Cole? Death would be a thousand times more merciful, yet you would lack the incentive to kill yourself. What could be worse?"

Cole was silent. The darkness gave free rein to

his imagination, and the picture he saw sent a cold shiver down his spine.

"All that life means to you would be blotted out," the other went on with remorseless eloquence. "Instead of matching your wits against a man's problems, as at present, you would probably be devoting your time to childish amusements. Imagine yourself placing buttons in a row and building houses out of blocks. You would be dragging a useless and broken body through life until——"

"Stop it!" said Cole. "You're in more danger of losing your mind than I am. Yours is already a bit twisted, unless I'm mistaken."

"Don't fool yourself. Unless you give us a reasonable guarantee that you will comply with our wishes, you will be a grimacing lunatic by morning. A very simple operation on the brain will do it. Among those seven men whom you saw around the circular table is a noted surgeon. Everything, including the ether and the instruments, will be ready in a few minutes. There is still time for to come to your senses."

In the back of Cole's mind was a hazy suspicion that he was dreaming, but the other's calm and softly penetrating tones gave him a feeling of reality.

"You wouldn't——" he began.

"Ah, wouldn't we? Just wait and see. Perhaps I can convince you."

Cole heard his footfalls cross the floor, and then a door opened and closed. For a few minutes he was alone, trying to arrange in an orderly process the odds and ends of the night's amazing happen-

ings. His mind staggered before the task, and suddenly the door opened again. He had a vague impression that two men were entering, and that they were carrying a burden between them. They moved about quickly in the darkness, and now and then they whispered in tones so low that Cole could not hear them.

A light flashed on, and in the same instant the door closed. After the long period of utter darkness, the sudden glare had a blinding effect. Cole blinked his eyes, but after a little he opened them wide in astonishment, and the sight that met them drew a long, trembling gasp from his lips.

There was only one other man in the room, a shivering, gibbering wreck of a man whose grimacing features and hollow cackle sent a series of chill shivers through Cole's body. For a long time he stared into the leering, slowly twitching face before he was able to realize that the wretch, seated a few feet from his cot, was Malcolm Reeves.

CHAPTER IV

"YELLOW"

WHEN he first went to work on the case of Reeves' mysterious disappearance, Cole had been shown several photographs of the missing man. Along the numerous twistings of the trail, he had carried with him a mental picture of a fine intellectual face, deep and rather somber eyes, a long nose, whose slenderness hinted at aristocratic breeding, a clean-cut jaw that denoted a great deal of aggressiveness, and lips that were a trifle too full and might have suggested sensuality, if the broad slope of the forehead had not conveyed a dominant impression of the student and the thinker. The picture in Cole's mind had represented a man about fifty years old, with a virile personality and quiet tastes.

The contrast between his mental image of Malcolm Reeves and the miserable creature, now sitting a few feet away, was so sharp that the comparison gave Cole a profound shock. His clothing hung loosely over his bony frame, and he seemed to have aged decades in the three weeks that had elapsed since his disappearance. His shoulders were hunched down a little, his head was bent forward, and the eyes stared rigidly into space, as if he were seeing something in the distance. His lips were twisted into a fixed, vacant smile that impressed Cole as the most hideous thing he had ever seen.

He tried to spring from the cot, momentarily forgetting that his arms and legs were bound. He sank back with a mutter of exasperation. Not much imagination was required to guess that the men who had brought about his own plight were also responsible for the condition of Malcolm Reeves.

Again something drew his glance to the insane man. The revolting picture seemed to hold Cole with an uncanny fascination. "What's happened?" he inquired, realizing a moment later that he might as well have addressed a wooden image.

Reeves was still gazing fixedly at the opposite wall. There was a look of insane glee in his shrunken eyes. He bent forward a little more, and then his lips began to move. "Yellow," he said. "Pretty yellow!"

The soft-spoken words and the giggle that followed caused Cole to shudder. He could see that Reeves' mind, or the pitiful remnant of it, was reveling in some childish fancy. The wreckage of a once splendid intellect was horrible to behold.

"What do you see?" he asked, wondering whether the man was capable of any form of response.

The other's face brightened, but Cole thought it was only an external glow, a reflected light rather than one kindled from within. He recoiled inwardly as another stream of giggling mirth flowed from the insane man's lips.

"Yellow," said Reeves again. "Pretty yellow!"

His expression became more rapt. His smile grew broader and deeper, but to Cole it seemed nothing more than a contortion of facial muscles.

He wondered whether the two words were all that was left of the man's vocabulary. He felt a desire to test him and see if there was not a remaining scrap of intellect that could be aroused.

"Listen, Mr. Reeves," he said sharply. "When did you last see Professor Carmody?"

The giggling ended in a quick intake of breath. Reeves' smile faded as abruptly as if an invisible hand had blotted it out. Watching him intently, Cole could see that his question had touched a slumbering chord in the man's mind. Fear and something akin to hate blazed in the shrunken eyes. It was a startling transformation, and Cole observed it in wonder. He had mentioned Carmody's name on the spur of a vagrant impulse, wondering whether it would awaken a recollection in the débris of Reeves' intellect. The effect was far beyond his expectations.

"Carmody!" said the insane man, and each syllable cut like a knife through the silence. "Carmody!"

He drew a shaking hand across his brow, and Cole fancied something was stirring in the dark corners of his mind. His face took on a strained look, as if he was trying to exercise the shattered remnants of his intellect. There was a flicker of returning sanity, a feeble ray of awakening reason.

It did not last long. Reeves gave a little shudder, there was a trembling gleam in his eye, then the fatuous grin came back to his lips, and once more he mumbled in rapt tones: "Yellow. Pretty yellow!"

Cole turned his head away with a shiver. His experiment had shown the hopelessness of the insane man's condition, but it had also suggested

several things to Cole. A recollection of a terrifying nature seemed to be buried in the wreckage of Reeves' mind, and evidently it had something to do with Professor Carmody. Cole had felt certain for a long time that the professor was responsible for the man's disappearance, but he had not cared to jeopardize his case by taking action before he had sufficient evidence in his possession, as a premature move on his part might have brought disastrous results. At that time he had not been sure whether the missing man was dead or alive. If still living, his safety might be endangered by hasty action, for Carmody would not hesitate to kill him if he thought it advisable. So Cole had waited, patiently biding his time and slowly, but surely, strengthening the meshes in which he hoped to entangle the professor.

Now he wondered to what extent his course had been correct. The maniac's startling reaction to the mention of Carmody's name seemed to confirm at least a part of his theory. What he could not understand was how Reeves, granting that the professor was responsible for his abduction, happened to be in this place of dark intrigue and baffling mystery. Evidently there must be a connecting link between Professor Carmody and the seven masked men who had sat around the circular table. Likely as not they were accomplices, banded together for the attainment of some secret object. That would at least explain why the seven men were so determined that Cole should drop the Carmody case, though it explained nothing else.

A slight sound interrupted the speculations with

which he had tried to relieve the tension he felt. He turned his head a little and saw that the door had opened a crack. A hand was inserted through the narrow opening. For a moment it fumbled over the wall, then came a faint click, and once more the room was dark. Men were moving about in the black for a time, and then all was quiet. The silence seemed to indicate that Cole was alone in the room, but he had an indefinable feeling that some one was standing beside his cot. In a moment his impression was confirmed.

"Mr. Cole," said a voice, and he recognized it at once, "I trust that what you have just seen has put you in a more reasonable frame of mind. Unless you comply with our wishes we shall do to you what we did to Malcolm Reeves."

Cole strained spasmodically against the cords that fettered his hands and feet. In the darkness his imagination sketched a picture of Reeves' hideously grinning face. For a moment he could almost hear the maniac's insane cackle. He banished the vision by sheer force of will.

"There's a great deal of finesse about your methods," he ironically observed. "I guessed, of course, that Reeves was brought in here to serve as an object lesson to me. It was quite impressive."

"And you have reconsidered?" asked the other hopefully.

Cole lay absolutely still on his back. It was all he could do to exclude the disturbing pictures of Reeves from his mind. Whenever a glimpse of it came back to him he felt a weakness that put him in fear of himself. "Not exactly," he managed to

say in steady tones. "I have merely been taking my own measure, as it were, trying to determine whether the loss of pride and self-respect is worse than the loss of one's sanity."

"And what is your conclusion?"

"I am still in doubt. There are so many ways of looking at the situation. For instance, one thing to be considered is that lost self-respect may be regained, while insanity is in most instances incurable."

"Excellent," murmured the other. "That's a very rational way of looking at the proposition. Such being the case it should not be difficult for you to choose between the two alternatives."

"But it is," protested Cole. "There is still another thing to be considered. Suppose I were to accept your terms. All I could give you would be my word of honor that I would live up to them."

"Quite sufficient," the other put in. "We know you are not the kind of man who goes back on his word."

"Thanks," said Cole sarcastically. "Just the same one's word of honor is a rather intangible thing. You can't bind me with a contract. It would not be legal, no matter how ingeniously worded, and it might incriminate yourselves. I am not in position to give you any pledges. You would have to be content with my bare promise. It would be sufficient in any ordinary case, but circumstances alter everything. I realize I am at the mercy of a gang of unprincipled scoundrels."

"Your epithets don't hurt us in the least," remarked the other man icily.

"Didn't expect they would. But don't you see that, under the circumstances, I would have no hesitancy at all about giving you a promise that I didn't intend to keep? I am not a bit quixotic, and I am too practical to indulge in cheap heroics. I have no ambition to become the hero of a tawdry melodrama. In order to escape a fate like the one you inflicted on Reeves, I would promise anything, and so would every other man whose head isn't full of moonshine. You follow me?"

"Perfectly. You are trying to make out that we have no hold over you. Your reasoning isn't bad, but you forget one thing. As it happens, we are in a position to exact a pledge from you, one that will hold you to us for life."

"What is it?"

The other gave a soft laugh. "You saw what a hopeless case Reeves is. There's no reason why he should go on living any longer. The merciful thing to do is to put him out of his misery."

"You mean——"

"Exactly, Mr. Cole. You are to seal the promise you give us by hustling Reeves off to a better world. We have planned it so that we will be able to prove that you killed him. Having incriminated yourself to that extent, and with the evidence in our possession, we need have no fear that you will go back on your word of honor. And now that we thoroughly understand each other, I must ask you to decide promptly. Our time is valuable."

A few moments passed in silence, but to Cole they were like weeks. Never before in all his life had so many thoughts and emotions been crowded into such a narrow space of time. He felt weak and shaken when it was over, but his voice was clear. "My answer is no," he declared. "If I were able I would give it to you in a more emphatic manner."

"Sorry, Mr. Cole," replied the other. "I won't accept your decision as final, however. I trust you will reconsider before you become unconscious under the ether."

With that he went out, leaving an ominous silence behind him. Cole tore frantically at the cords around his wrists, but they only cut the deeper into his flesh. He could see no escape from the awful fate that awaited him. Time and again the picture of Reeves' fatuously grinning face came back to him, causing him to writhe in mental torment. A tempting voice seemed to whisper in his ear, turning his thoughts into strange channels. To end a life that was worse than a living death appeared not such a dreadful thing to do. Cole himself would have preferred to die rather than suffer a fate like Reeves'. If he should ever fall into such a condition he would consider the man a benefactor who ended his misery.

He shook himself violently. A clammy perspiration was bathing his forehead. With a mental and physical paroxysm he brushed away the temptation to which he had nearly yielded a moment ago. Footsteps were approaching the door, and he knew a critical moment was at hand. Something within

him that was stronger than reason and logic shrank from the mere thought of taking Reeves' life. He wondered if there was no other alternative.

He tried to take a calm view of the situation. Though his hands and feet were tightly bound his persecutors evidently had not thought it necessary to strap him to the cot, since he would soon be under the influence of the ether. By experimenting he found that he could turn over on his sides and, thanks to the fact that his hands had been tied in front instead of behind, he was able to move his arms up and down and in a horizontal direction. Since he could not use his hands he did not see how he could turn this circumstance to his advantage, yet it continued to tantalize his imagination.

The door opened, and his ears told him that several men were entering the room. For a time they moved about in the darkness, as if making preparations of some sort. After a little the footsteps receded, and then the door opened and closed once more. Cole guessed that all but one or two of the men had withdrawn. After another brief delay, the lights flashed on once more, this time illuminating a different scene.

Reeves was back in the room, occupying the same chair in which he had sat the other time, but now his limbs were as tightly manacled as Cole's own. He moved his head slowly from side to side, as if sensing something unusual in the air, but his vacant stare showed that he had not the faintest inkling of what was going on.

After a glance at him, Cole looked away. Not far from the cot stood a tall man with a black

beard that covered nearly his entire face. He was holding a number of surgical implements to the light, giving each one a critical inspection before he placed it on a small table with a glass top that stood beside the cot. Cole could not restrain a shudder as he saw how calmly the man examined the sinister-looking little tools. There was a professional air about him that in Cole's mind stamped him as a surgeon.

Again his glance moved to the insane man, whose dull gaze seemed to be taking in each detail of the scene. The meaning of the little knives and the presence of the black-bearded man was terrifyingly clear.

The surgeon placed the last of the knives on the table beside the cot. They lay there in plain view, so close to Cole that if his hands had been free he could have reached out and touched them. The long, slender metal blades gleamed diabolically in the electric lights, and he wondered if they had been placed like that for the sole purpose of impressing their hideous significance upon him.

The black-bearded man came closer to the cot, and Cole caught a full view of his face. He had seen it once before, though only dimly, for the surgeon was one of the seven who had sat in the dusk at the circular table. He had worn a mask then, but the black beard, the high forehead and the bald spot on top of his head were unmistakable. Now his features were unveiled, and in this circumstance Cole saw a grim significance. The surgeon no longer had any reason to fear that Cole might recognize him if they should meet again.

He stopped beside the glass-topped table and, with hands clasped at his back, fixed a tranquil gaze on the reclining man. "You have one more chance, Mr. Cole," he remarked in a casual tone. "Hadn't you better reconsider your refusal?"

Cole looked up into the bearded face with a feeling that there was something peculiar about it, but his mind was too agitated to analyze the impression. In a playful manner the surgeon picked up one of the knives, holding it so that the light flashed against the keen blade.

Cole was trying to frame an answer, but just then something drew his gaze to the insane man. Reeves was straining forward in his chair, bending his weight against the fettering cords. From where he sat he had a clear view of both Cole and the surgeon, and his eyes were fixed with wild intensity on the knife in the latter's hand. Time and again he opened his lips, but the only sound that came was a hoarse rattle in his throat.

"Well, Mr. Cole?"

The surgeon, paying no attention to the lunatic, looked impatiently at Cole. Reeves, with mouth gaping and features horribly distorted, continued to stare at the knife.

"You refuse?" The surgeon waited a moment longer for an answer; then, with a shrug, he replaced the knife and stepped aside. Cole felt a sudden rush of blood to his head. If he was to escape a fate worse than death he must act at once. He spurred his wits to think of something to do. A tinkling, like that of a jar or a bottle being moved, sounded in the room. Again he bent his mind to

the seemingly hopeless task of finding a way out, but, even in this moment of desperate peril, he could not take his gaze from the insane man's face.

Reeves sat with shoulders hunched up and head turned a little to one side. Now and then his mouth twisted at the corners; from time to time a shudder broke the tension of his figure. A series of slight gurgling sounds fell on the stillness at intervals. All the while his eyes, with a smoldering something in their depths, were fixed on the knives spread out on the glass-topped table.

Suddenly Cole's body executed a little writhing motion. His nostrils sucked in a strong, sickening odor. With a sponge in his hand, the surgeon was coming toward the cot.

Once more, in a delirium of suspense, Cole glanced at the insane man. The quick dilation of Reeves' nostrils told he also had noticed the ether. The chair creaked as he put his weight against the cords. There was a look on his face that Cole felt would follow him through the night of madness that threatened to engulf him. Reeves' chest heaved violently, his whole body seemed to be rocked by a tumultuous emotion, and finally a long and oddly vibrant cry broke from his lips.

CHAPTER V

DISGUISED

TO Cole's rapt gaze the insane man presented a picture at once fearful and fascinating. Reeves was no longer looking at the keen-bladed knives, but now he was staring at the black-bearded surgeon with an intensity that seemed to strain every nerve and muscle in his body. The knotted cords at his temple swelled and took on a livid hue. Slowly and shakily he drew himself erect in the chair, and then his whole body was rocked by a paroxysm so violent that, for an instant, Cole thought the cords were about to snap.

The surgeon, with the reeking sponge in his hand, turned and watched the maniac. A smile twisted the bearded lips, and he stepped to the chair and spoke a few words in Reeves' ears. The insane man's chest heaved out, but the cry and the paroxysm seemed to have exhausted his energies, and only a feeble, fluttering moan came.

The spectacle had held Cole spellbound. Now, while the surgeon was leaning over the insane man and whispering in his ear, a sudden realization of his peril caused him to throw off the weird fascination which the scene had cast on him. He had only a few moments in which to act. Soon the reeking sponge would be at his nostrils, deadening his mental faculties.

His darting glance fell on the knives lying on the

glass-topped table beside the cot. They were so close to him that they seemed to mock and taunt him. Again it occurred to him that they had been placed like that for the sole purpose of impressing their infernal purpose upon him and battering down his fortitude. It had been a touch of refined cruelty on the black-bearded man's part, but it only strengthened Cole's determination not to yield.

Suddenly, as he kept looking at the knives, the gleam of an inspiration crept into his narrowing eyes. He cast a swift glance about the room. The black-bearded man was still occupied with Reeves and stood with his back turned to the cot. Cole, trembling with excitement, turned over on his side and wriggled as close to the edge of the cot as he could. He reached out his manacled hands over the glass-topped table. The cords around the wrists gave the fingers considerable leeway. In an instant they had closed around the handle of the nearest knife.

Cole tingled from head to foot. The subtle bit of strategy by which the black-bearded man had hoped to shatter his victim's nerve had now been turned to Cole's advantage. It gave him a fighting chance, though the odds were still overwhelmingly against him. His lips curled a little, and there was a belligerent sparkle in his eyes. Turning over on his back he dropped the knife beside him on the pillow, so that his head would temporarily screen it from the surgeon's sight. Then, letting his arms fall limply back against his abdomen, he waited for the surgeon to act.

Presently the black-bearded man turned away

from Reeves and stepped up to the cot. Cole lay motionless, with eyes half closed, as if partly dazed by contemplation of the terrible fate that awaited him. Inwardly he was straining and quivering with suspense. As yet the surgeon did not seem to have noticed that one of the knives was missing from the table, but he might do so any moment, and then Cole's only hope would be gone.

"Well, Mr. Cole?" he asked lightly. "For the last time I ask you to reconsider your refusal."

Cole lay very still. The last few minutes of suspense seemed to have wrought a great change in him. His lips moved as if he were trying to speak, but was too weak to use his voice.

The surgeon grinned into his beard. Evidently he thought the knives placed so close to his victim's side had exerted the intended psychological effect.

"Have you anything to say?" he asked, bending over the cot in an effort to catch Cole's faintly mumbled words.

Cole flexed his muscles for action. The moment for which he had waited was at hand. His chance had come; everything depended upon how he used it. He mumbled again, and the surgeon's head came a little closer to his chest.

"A little louder, please," said the black-bearded man.

Slowly, by imperceptible degrees, Cole drew up his manacled hands toward his chin. Suddenly his arms shot upward, forming a circular loop that instantly descended over the surgeon's head. With a startled cry the black-bearded man tried to draw back, but the arms that encircled his shoulders

were as strong and hard as springs of steel. He struggled frantically, but the encircling grip pinned his arms tightly to his sides, and his head was constantly being forced lower and lower toward the reclining man's chest. The sponge had dropped from his hand the moment Cole's arms were flung around his neck.

An exultant thrill went through Cole as the other's resistance grew feebler. Now the surgeon's head was almost level with his face. The only sounds in the room were the hard panting of the adversaries and an occasional giggle from the insane man. Fumes of ether were slowly filling the air.

Cole turned his head. In an instant the handle of the knife was firmly gripped between his strong, even teeth. He thrust out his jaw, and the point of the weapon grazed the black-bearded man's throat. Cole saw a look of fear creep into the man's eyes. The surgeon made a final attempt to wriggle free, but Cole's arms held him as in a vise. Once more the knife, tightly clasped between Cole's jaws, scratched the other's flesh. He remarked again the look of terror that was stamped on the surgeon's face. In view of the diabolical fate which the man had meant to inflict on him Cole was human enough to enjoy the other's agony.

Suddenly he bent a sharper look on the man's face. Once before he had wondered why there seemed to be something peculiar about it, but this was his first chance to examine the features at close quarters. Now he noticed that the beard which covered most of the face had an unnatural appearance. There were lines about the eyes that

did not seem quite genuine, and the exposed portions of the skin had an odd coloring. Obviously the man was disguised, and Cole could see that it had been rather cleverly done. He wondered why the disguise had been put on, since the surgeon had had every reason to expect that Cole would leave the room a raving lunatic and that there would be no danger of recognition if they should meet again.

He had not time to think further about it. The deadlock was only temporary; any fortuitous incident might upset Cole's advantage; instantly the door might open and admit one or more of the other members of the gang. Just now he had the surgeon at his mercy. Only a little slash with the knife, clamped between his teeth was needed to open an artery, but that would not release him from his predicament. Though he might be able to sever the cords around his ankles he could not move his hands with sufficient freedom to cut the strings around his wrists. While he was casting about for a plan a muffled groan of fright and pain broke from the surgeon's lips. Unconsciously Cole had once more scratched the man's throat with the knife.

"You're killing me!" protested the other man in a feeble voice.

"It would serve you right," declared Cole unfeelingly. "I don't know why I should have any compunction about killing a rat of your kind. We might come to some arrangement, however. What will you do if I spare your life?"

"Anything, anything you say."

Cole considered. The thing of first importance

was to get his hands free of the cords. In his present position, with his arms pinned tightly in Cole's embrace the surgeon could not untie them, and Cole did not see how he could give the man any freedom of movement without imperiling his own advantage.

"I am going to give you a chance for your life," he said, "but if you make the slightest false move you die instantly. Understand that?"

"I'll do whatever you say."

"All right, then. Turn over."

Cole relaxed his hold a trifle, and the surgeon turned in his arms. The point of the knife did not leave his flesh for an instant, and at any moment Cole could have inflicted a mortal wound by merely thrusting his head forward. Now, with the end of the blade in dangerous proximity to the surgeon's jugular vein, Cole gingerly released one of the man's arms, then commanded him to untie the cords around his wrists. The black-bearded man obeyed, and Cole transferred the knife from his mouth to his right hand. In a short time his feet had been released, and now he flung the surgeon aside and slipped from the cot.

Reeves had watched the proceeding with a dull stare. Now and then a hoarse giggle of glee had escaped him.

The surgeon got to his feet and drew a long breath of relief. His eyes, with a glint of lingering fear in their depths, watched Cole admiringly.

"You're a great scrapper, Mr. Cole," he admitted. "You turned the tables with a truly artistic touch. For a time I was in fear for my life. There was

no time to explain, and you wouldn't have believed me anyway."

"Explain?" Cole asked contemptuously. The little knife was still clutched tightly in his hand. "One doesn't expect explanations from curs of your type."

The surgeon laughed, and in the same instant his fingers touched a button. Cole flexed his muscles for another supreme test. Out of the corner of an eye he watched the surgeon; the other eye was fixed on the door. In a moment or two it would probably open in response to the surgeon's ring, and men would come tumbling upon him from all directions. Cole smiled grimly. He would die fighting rather than expose himself to the other and more terrible fate from which he had just escaped.

The door opened, and he poised himself, ready to spring forward. The nerve-racking suspense, which he had undergone on the cot, was forgotten now. His eye was clear, and his brain was rapidly throwing off the ether fumes that had escaped from the surgeon's sponge. The hand in which he held the knife came upward, prepared to strike down the first man who should approach.

Some one entered through the open door, and the arm fell limply to Cole's side. With gaping mouth he stared at the newcomer who executed a profound bow, while he pointed to the outer room. "Will you kindly step this way, Mr. Cole?" he asked in the courteous tones of a well-trained servant.

Cole laughed. The sudden reaction made him feel giddy. He had expected at least half a dozen

men to pounce on him when the door opened. By contrast there was something ludicrous about the salaaming figure, now confronting him.

"If you please, Mr. Cole." The man again waved his hand toward the outer room, and Cole obligingly followed his direction. There seemed to be nothing else to do than wait for the other side to make the next move. If he was walking into a trap, as appeared not at all unlikely, he still had the knife to defend himself with. And that was not all, he suddenly remembered; his pistol was still in his hip pocket. It was rather odd, he reflected, as he walked behind the servant, that no attempt had been made to take it from him.

In a few moments he was back in the long room with the circular table. The seven masked men were again grouped around it, and the light was as dim as before. The servant ushered him up to the chair occupied by the spokesman, then silently glided away. Once more Cole felt seven pairs of eyes searching his face, but this time he was aware of a new quality in the air.

"You may feel quite at ease, Mr. Cole," the spokesman began. "I can promise that no harm will come to you."

The calm, matter-of-fact tones incensed Cole when he recalled by what a narrow margin he had escaped the fate which these men had tried to inflict upon him.

"How magnanimous!" he gibingly exclaimed.

The other chuckled. "Oh, we can understand that you don't feel particularly friendly toward us. Incidentally we know all that happened in the

other room. You acquitted yourself nobly, Mr. Cole."

"Save your compliments. They are on a par with your promises."

"You would naturally feel that way after what has happened. Mr. Cole, I am going to ask you to forget what occurred in the other room."

"Forget?" asked Cole incredulously, feeling as though the episode he had just passed through would live in his memory till his dying day.

"Well, perhaps that is asking too much," the other admitted. "By the way, your bitterness toward us is natural enough, but don't you find some compensation in the knowledge that you have passed through fire unscathed? You remained true to yourself in one of the severest tests a man can be subjected to. Isn't there some satisfaction for you in that?"

"Oh, yes, a lot," said Cole ironically. "It's worth something to a man to know that nothing can bend him. If you expect me, however, to get down on my knees and thank you for giving me a chance to prove myself you are mistaken."

"We don't expect anything of the kind. I am merely trying to point out that you have cause for self-congratulation as well as bitterness. You probably won't be able to forget what has happened, but I am going to ask you to dismiss it from your mind temporarily, while I make a new proposition to you."

Cole felt a trifle dazed. The effrontery of the man was unbelievable. For a moment he suspected it was all a weird jest. "Go on," he said dryly.

"Your superb insolence interests me. I am curious to see how far it will carry you."

"You shall see in a few minutes. I will begin by stating certain facts. Perhaps later on I shall be able to prove them to their satisfaction, but just now I must ask you to accept them as an hypothesis."

"Proceed," said Cole. "I'll try to believe that black is white."

"That's practically what it amounts to. The first fact I am asking you to accept on faith, for the present, is that we are not responsible for Malcolm Reeves' deplorable condition. An operation was performed on his brain, but we had nothing to do with it."

He paused as if expecting an objection.

"The second fact I am asking you to accept provisionally," he went on when Cole showed no inclination to speak, "is that we are just as anxious to solve the Carmody case as you can possibly be. We are more anxious, in fact, for we know more about its vast scope and enormous complexities than you do. Are you with me so far, Mr. Cole?"

Cole's shoulder made a seesawing motion. The whole thing was preposterous, but there was a quality in the man's tone that impressed him against his will. "You are asking me to believe that you are sheep in wolves' clothing," he remarked.

"That's undoubtedly how it looks to you. Won't you try to brush your doubts aside, Mr. Cole? Remember that in due time I will prove everything I say."

Cole's indignation was cooling. There was some-

thing about the spokesman that seemed to exert a subtle magnetism on him. Already his dreadful experience in the other room seemed dim and remote, though a few minutes ago he had thought it was indelibly etched on the scroll of his memory. "If what you say is true, then why——"

"No questions, please. You would not believe me if I were to answer them. All I can say now is that we have excellent reasons for what we have done. Some time before long I think you yourself will approve them. Just now you must accept my statements on faith. Will you try to believe that we had nothing to do with Reeves' condition and that we are on your side in the Carmody matter?"

"You can't deny that you tried to put me in the same condition Reeves is in?"

"We can, but we won't just at present. What happened in the other room I am asking you to dismiss from your mind in order that you may view the facts I have placed before you in an unbiased frame of mind. With that episode eliminated can't you place a little temporary credence in what I say?"

Cole tried to clarify his thoughts, but without much success. He realized with satisfaction that his hand was still clutching the knife. He wondered whether, but for his quickness of mind and his deft handling of the little weapon, he would not now be a raving madman. It seemed strange that he was able to think coolly about the matter, and stranger still that he found himself listening to the spokesman's arguments with any degree of seriousness.

Finally he shook his head. "It won't quite go down," he declared. "You are asking me to take too much for granted. One's brain was made to think with, and your statements won't bear too close reasoning. You will have to give me your proofs before I can believe you."

A pause followed his words; then a chorus of whispers went around the table. The spokesman leaned over and consulted the man seated beside him.

"I don't blame you," he declared, again turning to Cole. "After all, your skepticism is quite natural. It is even a tribute to your intellectual powers, for only children and feeble-minded persons accept unsupported statements. Now, as for proofs, let me see. Would you be convinced if you should find the man who is responsible for Reeves' condition?"

"You know who he is?"

"We have had our suspicions for some time, but we were not certain until a short while ago. A delicate operation, by which certain brain cells were deadened, was performed on Reeves. We knew Professor Carmody could not have performed it, for he is not a surgeon. We began to look for an accomplice, and finally we found a man who seemed to fit into our theory of the case. Mr. Cole, did you ever hear of Doctor Dickson Latham?"

"Never," said Cole.

"Well, certain circumstances, which needn't be mentioned just now, made us believe that Doctor Latham was the man whom we were looking for. The matter was really of no great importance, only one of the minor angles of the case, but any

little light, shed on the corners of the mystery, might help toward solving the whole. We felt fairly certain Doctor Latham was our man; in the last hour we have become positive of it."

"In the last hour!" exclaimed Cole. "How?"

"Malcolm Reeves told us."

"Reeves told you?"

"By his actions, while you were lying on the cot. We had two reasons for staging that little scene in the other room. The primary one we won't go into at present. The other was to jog the dead part of Reeves' brain back to life, by having him witness the preparations for an operation that, in its essential aspects, must have resembled the one performed on himself. We hoped that the smell of the ether, the sight of the knives and the preparations in general would awaken a slumbering memory in his mind. The experiment was only partly successful, but Reeves' actions proved beyond doubt that he recognized the officiating surgeon."

Through the dusk Cole stared into the speaker's calm face. "Then the surgeon——"

"You probably didn't notice it," the other interrupted, "but the man who officiated as the surgeon was disguised. The disguise was put on by one of our men, an expert in that line."

"I noticed it, and it was a good job," Cole remarked. "I couldn't see why it was necessary, though."

"The disguise was put on, not to hoodwink you, but for its effect on Reeves."

"I don't understand."

"But you will when I tell you that the disguise gave the officiating surgeon a superficial, but fairly convincing, resemblance to Doctor Dickson Latham."

"Clever, I'll say!" exclaimed Cole who could appreciate ingenuity even in men who had caused him the most agonizing moments in his life. He recalled Reeves' intense agitation while the preparations were in progress. At the time he had not known what it meant, but he remembered that the surgeon had watched Reeves very closely, and this had given Cole his chance to snatch up the knife from the table.

"There is no doubt that Reeves thought he was seeing the man who had performed the operation upon him," the spokesman went on. "One of us was watching the scene through a small opening in the wall, and it was quite evident that the surgeon's resemblance to Doctor Latham gave Reeves a profound shock. Our suspicions have been confirmed, but as yet we have no legal proof. We want you, Mr. Cole, to go out and get the evidence against Doctor Latham."

"Me?"

"Why not? You are a detective, a very good one, though the fact isn't generally known. If you find that Latham is guilty you will be more inclined to credit our statements and think favorably of the proposition we shall make you. You will leave here as you came, blindfolded and under guard. Until we understand each other better we don't want you to learn too much about us. You will wish to sleep late in the morning, but to-morrow afternoon you can attack the Carmody case from a new angle,"

"And my clients?" asked Cole.

"You will be all the better able to serve them because of your connection with us. As soon as you have found your evidence against Latham, or learned enough to convince you that we are trustworthy, you will come here again and report. We shall find a way of communicating with you in due time. What do you say to the idea?"

Cole pondered. He tried to analyze the situation, but all he could see were contradictions and perplexities. His only clear thought was that he had nothing to lose and perhaps much to gain by adopting the suggestion. His glance swept the circle of masked faces, all of them turned expectantly in his direction.

"The idea is good," he finally declared. "I shall pay my respects to Doctor Latham to-morrow afternoon."

CHAPTER VI

DOCTOR LATHAM

THE sun was several hours high the following morning when Kingdon Cole jumped out of bed and, from force of habit, turned toward his bathroom. A glance into the mirror on the white-tiled wall made him start.

A man, even though he have nerves of steel and a constitution hard as armor, can't pass through a siege of intense mental torture without showing traces of it. The nerve-racking agony, which Cole had undergone while lying on the cot, had left marks which seven hours of sound sleep had not removed. There was a suspicion of pallor beneath the bronze of his face. The usual brightness of his eyes was dimmed by a smoldering flicker which hinted at a long glimpse into infernal horrors. His face was drawn, and there were telltale lines and furrows. A twenty-four-hour growth of beard did not improve his appearance.

"Nerves a bit on edge," he told himself, turning away from the mirror. "Look as if I hadn't slept a wink in a week. My landlady would tell me I need a doctor, but a shower and a shave will make me as chipper as a colt."

Whistling, he stepped into the tub and turned on the water. A few minutes of wriggling and writhing under the icy shower would remove all signs of his adventure. He thrilled to the first cold

splash, and then Cole drew back from beneath the shower. His lips twisted slowly.

"Guess I'll try a doctor instead," he decided. "I'm really in pretty bad shape. Nervous symptoms are not to be trifled with. I'll see what Doctor Dickson Latham has to say about my condition."

Reluctantly he turned off the cold current and resigned himself to a lukewarm bath that did not refresh him in the least. Not too graciously, for habit becomes an exalted thing with men who live alone, he also decided to forgo his regular morning shave. It was best, he whimsically reflected, that Doctor Latham should see him at his worst. He dressed with less than his usual care, took in the bottle of milk and the newspaper that were always left at his door, and, before starting to prepare his own simple breakfast, poured out a saucerful of milk for "Toots."

Toots was a white-and-yellow cat who had slipped into his rooms one morning and made herself at home. Cole hadn't had a word to say about the arrangement. He had been helpless before Toots' firmness, and the cat had made herself a fixture in his establishment. With a languid indifference and an occasional feline shrug she permitted herself to be waited on by Cole, who at times wondered whether the cat was patronizing him. When Toots selected his softest pillow to sleep on and sunned herself on his writing desk beside the window Cole felt that the sanctity of his bachelor existence was being violated, but the cat's blandly tyrannizing ways left him without a word of protest.

After breakfast he called up Doctor Latham's office and made an appointment for half past two. Then he sat down with his newspaper and pipe, the latter a smelly affair with a bowl shaped into the resemblance of a monkey's face. It was an odd conceit, and it had been given him in lieu of his fee by an impecunious client. Only once had Cole had words with his landlady, and that was when the well-intentioned woman had undertaken to scrape out the bowl of his favorite pipe with a potato peeler. Cole smoked a weird mixture, compounded by himself of several domestic brands and spiced with a dash of perique. The strong concoction was a stimulant to mental effort, but at first he had hesitated to smoke such pungent stuff in the presence of the dainty Toots. The cat had not seemed to mind, however.

He turned the pages of his newspaper, but found nothing that interested him. At length he threw the paper aside and refilled his pipe. Toots was sprawled out on the unfinished manuscript of an article on criminal tendencies which he was preparing for a psychological review. He gave the cat a reproachful glance, but said nothing. There were times when Toots seemed to go too far.

He looked out into the warm sunlight that bathed Gramercy Park, but his thoughts were flitting in and out of a maze of rooms on the top floor of a skyscraper, located somewhere in the financial center. His recollections of the previous night were a queer medley of horror and mystery, of things that were terribly vivid and others that were dim and disconnected like a dream. Now, as he sat in the sun-

light, leisurely smoking his pipe, he tried to picture the mystic circle in the dimly lighted room. He could not quite focus his mental vision on the scene; it was too shadowy and unreal. The seven masked faces melted into a blur, then faded away completely. It was no use trying to guess who those seven men were, or what their amazing conduct might mean. Perhaps his interview with Doctor Latham would suggest a solution to the mystery.

The idea of approaching the doctor in the rôle of a patient had been something of an inspiration, but he had made no plans beyond that. The mock consultation would give him a chance to take the physician's mental and physical measure and see what manner of man he was. Cole was a good judge of faces and a keen observer of human nature. To him the slightest gesture and the most casually spoken word had a meaning all their own. His first aim was to find out whether Latham was the kind of man who might commit such an atrocious crime as the operation on Malcolm Reeves; after that he would let his actions be guided by developments.

Before starting for his appointment he thought it might be well to gather a few facts about the physician. He consulted his copy of "Who's Who." Dickson Latham was a specialist in nervous disorders, a graduate of several universities, a member of several learned societies, and his claim to distinction rested on his having written a number of treatises on cerebral surgery. The last fact seemed significant to Cole. He closed the book,

gave Toots another mildly reproachful look, and went out to lunch.

A few minutes before half past two he rang the doorbell of the old brownstone house in the Sixties, just east of Fifth Avenue, in which Doctor Latham resided and had his office. A young woman in the reception room handed him a magazine six months old and asked him to wait. Cole sat down and glanced about him out of the tail of an eye, while he pretended to look at the pictures in the periodical. It was a commonplace room, stuffily crowded with upholstered furniture. Two bookcases were filled with ponderous volumes in drab bindings. It was the typical reception room of a fairly thriving physician who derives most of his patronage from the neurotic and dyspeptic individuals of the upper middle class.

After a brief wait Cole was facing the physician across a mahogany desk in the inner office.

"What seems to be the matter?" asked Doctor Latham in a brisk, cheerful voice.

"Nerves," said Cole, making a lugubrious face. "No appetite. Can't sleep nights. Always tired and out of sorts."

"Well, well, that's too bad. You do look a bit run down, Mr. Stone. Let me see your tongue."

"Stone" was the name Cole had given over the telephone. It had seemed an unnecessary precaution, since Kingdon Cole was known to only a few people. His name seldom if ever appeared in connection with his work as a criminal investigator, but Cole always practiced discretion to a fault.

While Doctor Latham looked at his tongue and

felt his pulse Cole studied the physician closely, without appearing to do so. His first glance gave him a deep respect for the skill with which the surgeon of the night before had been made up. Doctor Latham was an inch or so taller, also a trifle thinner, and his black beard had the vitalic sheen that is not easily imitated; otherwise the resemblance was quite impressive.

"Let me test your heart," said the doctor, reaching for his stethoscope.

Cole bared his chest. He was already beginning to suspect that he was chasing a fool's errand. Doctor Latham did not seem capable of deliberate wrongdoing, to say nothing of a fiendish crime. In vain Cole searched his face for the faintest trace of duplicity. The physician had the perennial optimism and the bristling cheerfulness that, in cases of nervous disorders, are far more efficacious than pills and extracts. The very tone of his voice, together with his hearty laugh, acted as a stimulant on jaded nerves.

"There isn't anything the matter with you, Mr. Stone," he declared when the examination was finished. "I can give you a tonic if you wish, but a couple of days' rest will do you more good."

Cole buttoned up his shirt and replaced his collar. He felt certain now that his visit to the doctor's office had been in vain. Latham's kindly smile would have disarmed any suspicions remaining in his mind. It was a charming smile, a flash of white teeth against a setting of black beard, and it gave the final magnetic touch to a compelling personality.

Cole chided himself for wasting valuable time,

but he wished to make doubly sure before leaving the office. He wondered what would be the effect on the doctor if he should suddenly mention the name of Malcolm Reeves. None at all, very likely, he told himself; yet he felt an itching desire to make the test.

He took out his pocketbook and looked questioningly at the doctor, meanwhile wondering how he might mention Reeves' name in a casual, and yet sufficiently abrupt, manner to make the test conclusive.

"Sit down, Mr. Stone," said Doctor Latham, waving him to a chair. "You interest me. What is your profession?"

"Author," said Cole, recalling that he had two volumes on criminology to his credit.

"Ah! And what do you write?"

"Trifling things," said Cole modestly. "You probably never saw any of them. Such frivolous reading matter wouldn't interest you."

"I read very little. The medical journals and a glance at the newspapers are about all I find time for. Do you know, Mr. Stone, that you puzzle me considerably?"

"Indeed!" said Cole absently, still wondering how he might precipitate Malcolm Reeves' name into the conversation.

Doctor Latham smiled genially. A question kept teasing Cole's mind. What would be the effect on that beaming countenance if he should suddenly speak Malcolm Reeves' name? Probably none whatever, he once more told himself; but the thought continued to tantalize him.

"There is a type of neurasthenic that is known to every medical practitioner," the doctor went on. "Their symptoms are quite well defined. Their ailments are mostly imaginary. On the slightest pretext they will run to a physician with a long tale of woe. The physician in most instances, gives them a little sympathetic advice, a harmless tablet made up of sugar and dough, and pockets his fee. There's nothing else to do. If told that their troubles exist only in their imagination they get offended and run to another doctor. Personally I don't care for that kind of patients. Now, Mr. Stone, you don't belong to that type. You are not a neurasthenic, far from it. I wish I had your nerves."

Cole regarded him with a questioning look.

Doctor Latham laughed pleasantly. "You're in perfect condition, Mr. Stone. Perhaps you have smoked too much, or taken too much strong coffee in the last few days, resulting in one or two sleepless nights, but there is nothing else the matter with you. Ordinarily you would have shaken off the effects with a cold shower, or a hike in the country. I dare say you haven't consulted a physician more than two or three times since you grew up. Under the circumstances I am somewhat curious to know why you came to me."

Cole gave him a sharp glance, but the affably smiling face instantly quieted the misgivings which the doctor's statement had aroused.

"What I don't see," Latham went on, "is why you went to a doctor at all, and why to me in particular. We never saw each other until to-day. I don't flatter myself by thinking that you knew me

by reputation. People who have no regular physician usually go to some one recommended to them by friends. They don't like to consult a doctor who is an utter stranger to them. Perhaps among my patients there is a friend of yours who mentioned me to you?"

"That's it exactly," said Cole, thrilling inwardly as he saw his chance to pitch Reeves' name into the conversation. "Only the other day I was complaining to a friend of not feeling well, and he suggested I go to you. His name——"

"Ah," asked Doctor Latham, speaking in very soft tones. "I wonder if you are referring to Malcolm Reeves?"

For a moment Cole looked as if he had received a blow between the eyes. He gathered himself in an instant, but not before the doctor had noticed his surprise. The physician was still smiling, but now the smile was different. It was frosty and pale. "I see I guessed right," he murmured.

"Is Reeves one of your patients?" Cole managed to ask.

The doctor leaned back in the chair, crossed his long legs, and gazed toward the ceiling. Cole became conscious of a distinct chill in the air, and he felt irritated at himself for having stumbled into the same trap he had set for the physician. Doctor Latham, he was beginning to perceive, was a man whose mental thrust was as quick and sure as his own.

"Frankness is an excellent policy, Mr. Stone," observed the physician coldly. "We shall make better progress if you will put all your cards on the

table. You did not come here to consult me about your health. May I ask why you are honoring me with this visit?"

"You have not yet answered my own question," observed Cole, quickly rallying to the verbal fencing match. "Is Reeves a patient of yours?"

The doctor lowered his gaze. His piercing eyes searched Cole's face. A faint flash of white teeth showed between the bearded lips.

"I believe that question has a point to it," he observed. "You ought to know, Mr. Stone, that a physician never discusses his patients. It is a very good rule, especially in the present instance. It affords me a good excuse for not answering your question."

"Then you admit you found the question embarrassing?"

"A discreet man never admits anything, Mr. Stone. I may point out, however, that questions are never embarrassing, although answers sometimes are. I believe Wilde says something to that effect in one of his plays."

"Then you positively decline to answer?"

"In order to spare us mutual embarrassment, yes. You see, Mr. Stone, there are circumstances in which a truthful answer may convey an erroneous impression. Now, won't you tell me to what I owe the honor of this visit?"

"Is that a candid question, Doctor Latham?"

"By no means, my friend. I knew the answer before I spoke the question. I was merely curious to see whether you would reply truthfully."

Cole smiled. It was evident that Doctor Latham was a past master in the art of dueling with words. The man's frankness amazed him. In admitting that he knew the purpose of Cole's visit he had also admitted that he knew something about Malcolm Reeves' condition. But he had turned his phrases so adroitly that nothing of a tangible nature could be fastened on him.

"Will you tell me how you knew, doctor?"

"Through a process of elimination. I knew at first glance that your concern over your physical condition was only a subterfuge. That narrowed the range of speculation down considerably. In fact, it left only one possible theory in regard to the object of your visit."

"Why only one? Isn't it conceivable, for instance, that I came here to see if your office contains anything worth stealing?"

Doctor Latham shook his head. "You don't look the part, Mr. Stone."

"Well, suppose I am an officer of the law and came here to see if you are prescribing illegal amounts of intoxicating liquor or habit-forming drugs?"

"You didn't go about it the right way."

"Couldn't I be a long-lost friend or relative?"

"I haven't either. You came here for one specific purpose, Mr. Stone, and I know what that purpose is."

Cole regarded him narrowly. "Knowledge sometimes implies guilt," he remarked in casual tones.

"But not always. You think that, because I know the object of your visit, I have guilty knowledge

of a certain matter that you are interested in. That's a very loose inference, Mr. Stone."

Cole thought for a few moments. The other's indirect frankness amazed him, yet Doctor Latham was entirely too slippery to permit himself to be pinned down to hard facts.

"Each of us seems to have come to stalemate," observed the physician after a pause. "Shall we call the game a draw? Both of us have gained something. You think you have verified a suspicion, while I have learned to be on my guard against a new source of possible danger. Why not leave well enough alone?"

"It's a good suggestion," said Cole, smiling. "Thanks for a very interesting half hour, doctor. Good day." He bowed and moved toward the door, but the doctor's voice made him turn back.

"Just one moment, Mr. Stone. I think you have forgotten something. My fee is ten dollars. Ah, thank you!"

CHAPTER VII

COLE RECEIVES A WARNING

HE left the physician's office a poorer, but a wiser, man. The half hour had been well spent even though the interview had yielded little in the way of tangible results. Cole had met an interesting personality and come in contact with a fine-edged mind. The doctor, with his subtleties and his evasions, had proven a fascinating character. His depth and elusiveness carried a teasing appeal to Cole's imagination. Cole was not yet through with Doctor Latham.

He walked to the corner, turned into a tobacconist's shop, and bought a package of cigarettes, then stood at the curb and smoked one, while he glanced now and then at the physician's house. The drab brownstone façade seemed as mocking and tantalizing as the man who dwelt within. It was as baffling and impenetrable as the doctor himself. Cole tried to analyze his impressions, but it was a hard task. The physician had admitted nothing except by implication. He had thrown out certain bold hints, and then he had practically challenged Cole to make the most of them.

Cole did not like to draw hasty conclusions, but, after he had sifted down his impressions, there remained in his mind a picture of a polished and very artful rogue who performed his machinations with an adroit touch and a high degree of finesse. The picture was blurred in spots, and he had to

use his imagination to touch up the obscure parts. It was significant, however, that the surgeon's make-up should have exerted such a startling effect on Malcolm Reeves the night before. Beyond doubt Reeves had thought that he recognized the man who was responsible for his pitiful state. This proved inferentially Doctor Latham was the man who——

But Cole did not like to deal in inferences. They were treacherous things, as he had observed on numerous occasions. He must have more facts before he began building up theories on the flimsy foundation which Doctor Latham's oily innuendos had created in his mind. Meanwhile it was interesting to note that the clew which he had brought with him from the circular table appeared to be a substantial one. He had not convinced himself of Doctor Latham's guilt, but he had at least found a promising lead. Reluctantly, for his experience of the night before still rankled, he was forced to admit that there was a modicum of truth in what the spokesman had told him.

He finished his cigarette and was about to turn away, but just then a figure, rounding the opposite corner, claimed his attention. With a little start he recognized Professor Carmody. Bending over a stout cane the professor walked with a jerky gait and the plopping sound of shoes several sizes too large. He wore a sun-bleached silk hat and, despite the balmy autumn weather, a long overcoat covered his gaunt form. Cole nodded in a knowing way as he saw the professor turn into Doctor Latham's house.

Thoughtfully he walked away. His suspicions and speculations were assuming tangible form. Professor Carmody's visit to Latham's house in broad daylight suggested several things. Viewed in connection with certain other circumstances, it hinted strongly at a bond of interest between the two men. In view of what Cole already knew it seemed not so very far-fetched to suppose that they were associates in some enterprise that was more or less closely related to Malcolm Reeves' fate. That Carmody should openly call on the doctor seemed to indicate that the conspirators felt that they had covered their tracks so carefully that ordinary precautions could be thrown to the wind.

Cole cut through a corner of the park, and gradually his perplexities dissipated themselves in the soft autumnal haze that hung over the greenery. He knew how to loaf as well as to work, and he possessed the happy knack of forgetting his problems in contemplation of rippling waters, or an azure sky. It was thus he conserved his energies and kept in touch with the softer aspects of life.

He rested for half an hour, and then he remembered he had a duty to perform. It was not a pleasant task, but it must be done. Now that he had learned something definite about Malcolm Reeves' fate, it was necessary that he should report progress to his clients. As he retraced his steps across the park and turned north on Fifth Avenue he wondered how much it would be advisable to tell. To go into details in regard to his adventures of the previous night would be impossible, for Cole himself did not know what they meant.

Ascending the steps of a square-cornered house of gloomy aspect he rang the doorbell. There was a tomblike air about the residence of Hector Englebreth that gave Cole a chill each time he visited the house. Out of deference to the whims of the invalid who occupied it the window shades were nearly always lowered. Doors turned without the faintest sound on well-oiled hinges. Heavy carpets muffled the footfalls of inmates and visitors. The heavily shaded lamps threw a subdued light on massive and somberly upholstered furniture that seemed to belong to a remote past.

A tight-lipped manservant ushered Cole into the library. Englebreth was seated in a wheel chair before a desk of black walnut. Despite the infirmity, which an acute case of inflammatory rheumatism had brought him, his long and triangular face gave an impression of wiry strength. His shoulders, as he sat hunched in the wheel chair, seemed uncommonly broad. His face was bloodless; his short-cropped, upstanding hair was almost white. Except when he spoke, the long, thin lips were tightly compressed, making him look as though he were constantly exerting his will power to hide the signs of his suffering.

"Any news, Mr. Cole?" he inquired in a low, toneless voice.

"I have made some progress," replied Cole, also speaking in subdued tones. In that dim, somber room it seemed natural to speak softly. "I have reason to believe that your brother-in-law is still alive."

Englebreth had been tapping the desk with a pen-

cil. Suddenly the tapping stopped. He gazed fixedly at the detective. "How much reason?" he asked.

"I know it to be a fact," said Cole, weighing his words, "that Mr. Reeves was alive last night."

"So," mumbled the other in tones scarcely above a whisper. "Professor Carmody hasn't done away with him, then. I feared that he might——" He broke off, then raised his voice a little. "How do you know this, Mr. Cole? How can you be so positive that my brother-in-law was alive last night? You don't mean to say that you have seen him?"

The last sentence was spoken in tense and vibrant tones, so unlike Englebreth's usually colorless voice.

"Before I answer that question," said Cole, "I want to ask you one. What makes you so positive that Professor Carmody has had a hand in your brother-in-law's disappearance?"

"Have you learned something that has brought you to a contrary view?"

"Please answer my question."

A scowl darkened Englebreth's face. He resumed his slow tapping with the pencil. "We know that my brother-in-law had frequent and secret meetings with Carmody. We have established definitely that he had an appointment with the professor on the night of his disappearance. One of the servants in his house heard him make the appointment over the telephone. You yourself learned, from the delicatessen keeper across the street from Carmody's place, that a man answering Malcolm's description entered the house on that particular night. Fairly conclusive, I should say."

Cole eyed him levelly. "You are holding something back, Mr. Englebreth. You have not stated your principal reason for suspecting Carmody in connection with Mr. Reeves' disappearance."

The tapping became a furious tattoo. "Why do you say that, sir?"

Cole fumbled for words, then laughed. "I'll be hanged if I know! It's nothing but a hunch. From the first I had a feeling that you were not telling me all, but I admit I had no sound reason for thinking so."

Englebreth, seemingly mollified, smiled. "You detectives are suspicious of everybody. I suppose that's a part of your stock in trade. However, I don't mind admitting that, in this instance, you were partly right. I have told you everything that can be of any help to you in your search for Malcolm; yet there are certain trifling details that, for private reasons and out of regard for the family, I have not confided to you. You would not be interested in them, and they couldn't be of any possible use to you. It was because of these private and delicate matters that I took the case to you instead of the police. Now will you answer my question? Have you seen Malcolm?"

"I have, Mr. Englebreth. I saw him last night."

"Where?" The invalid strained forward in his chair. "In Professor Carmody's house?"

"No; I have not yet seen the inside of the professor's residence."

"Then where did you see him?" The tapping had ceased again, and Englebreth was waiting breathlessly for the answer.

"That's the queer part of it." Cole gave a little baffled laugh. "I have seen your brother-in-law, but I can't tell you where."

"You can't?"

"Because I don't know."

A threatening look crossed Englebreth's face. "This is no occasion for jests, Mr. Cole. Even if you have no feelings of your own in the matter, you ought to respect the sentiments of other people. My wife is deeply shocked over the uncertainty regarding her brother's fate."

"Pardon me, Mr. Englebreth. I laughed, but it was only out of sheer bewilderment. I had an experience last night that was so unbelievable that I shan't try to describe it. I feel dazed whenever I look back upon it. All I can tell you is that I saw Mr. Reeves alive."

"And well?" questioned Englebreth sharply.

"He seemed to have been through a trying experience."

"You are quibbling. I want the truth."

"Perhaps I shall be able to give it to you some time within the next twenty-four hours. For the present I fear you will have to be satisfied with what I have told you. My impressions of what I saw and heard last night are not very clear. You will understand the reason when I give you a full report."

"This is strange talk, Mr. Cole."

"Not half so strange as some of the things that happened to me last night."

Englebreth sat erect in his chair, regarding the detective with a piercing gaze. Evidently he was

far from satisfied, and Cole could not blame him. Silence fell between them; then a soft tinkling was heard. Even the telephone seemed to utter its summons in whispers in that house of subdued sounds.

The invalid wheeled his chair a little closer to the desk and put the receiver to his ear. A conversation ensued, and gradually Englebreth's face underwent a transformation. Cole could not interpret the new look that came into his countenance, but he watched it in wonder. In a few minutes the invalid hung up, and the puzzling expression left his face as suddenly as it had come. He was smiling when he turned to Cole.

"On the whole I find your report quite satisfactory," he said in conciliating tones. "I appreciate the difficulties you have to deal with. Don't mind me if I seem impatient. May I expect to hear from you soon again?"

"To-morrow, I hope." Cole was still marveling at the change he had witnessed in his client. He wondered whether the telephone conversation had brought it about. From Englebreth's part in it he had been unable to make out its nature, but he imagined that his client had received news of a startling kind. After an exchange of a few casual remarks he got up and moved toward the door.

"Just one thing more, Mr. Cole," said Englebreth as he placed his hand on the knob. "Please be careful."

"What?" Cole turned and looked back at the invalid. The tone, rather than the words, had given him an odd sensation. Englebreth's white face was

wreathed in smiles, but Cole sensed a hidden barb somewhere.

"Just be careful," said the invalid. "That's all, Mr. Cole."

Cole went out, but echoes of Englebreth's voice pursued him through the door and out on the street. The words had sounded as though they contained a veiled threat of some kind. What could he have meant? He turned the question over in his mind, time and again. Was it possible that Englebreth, in some strange and devious way, had learned of the attempt that had been made to persuade Cole to betray his client?

The theory seemed grossly improbable, but, as he walked along, he could think of no other solution. The more he thought of it the more likely it seemed that his client had, in some mysterious manner, got an inkling of last night's happenings. He remembered the agitation he had shown at the telephone. And later, when he gave Cole that peculiar warning, his voice had sounded as though he meant to convey a threat of terrible punishment if the detective should go back on his duty.

Cole had not walked far when his step began to lag. He paused at a corner and glanced at his watch. He pursed his lips, then he scowled a little, and a look of weighty responsibility came into his face.

It was time to go home and feed Toots.

CHAPTER VIII

THE UNKNOWN SEVEN

ALL evening Cole had felt a presentiment that his telephone was to ring. When it finally did ring, shortly after eleven o'clock, he knew, even before he lifted the receiver from the hook, that he was about to receive a message from the mysterious seven.

His "hello" was answered by the rich soprano voice of the woman who called herself Miss Brown, but somehow it sounded different. The frolicsome undertone, which he had noticed the previous evening, was gone. In place of it there was a faint tremor that hinted of keen anxiety.

"I am calling from a public booth near Madison Square," she told him. "At exactly twelve o'clock I shall be waiting in my car, on the southeast corner of Broadway and Twenty-third Street."

"I'll be there," said Cole firmly. During the late afternoon and evening he had made up his mind that, if a summons should come from the mysterious seven, he would obey it.

"But be careful," she went on, and the last word had an oddly familiar sound in Cole's ears. "An attempt will be made to follow you."

"I know," said Cole lightly. "I've been watched ever since I went out to dinner this evening. I believe somebody is looking up at my windows this very moment. Have no fear. I'll shake him off."

Again requesting him to be careful, Miss Brown rang off. For a moment, after the connection had

been severed, he stood smiling into the transmitter. Then he stepped to the window and looked out into Gramercy Park. The sky was partly overcast, and a haze of moonlight and shadows hovered over the trees. Almost directly below his window stood a gaunt individual whose eyes were slanting up at him beneath the brim of a dark felt hat.

Cole examined his pistol before he put it in his pocket, donned hat and light overcoat, and went out. On the stoop he paused for a moment and stuck a cigarette between his lips. Then he swung down the steps and sauntered up to the watcher at the curb.

"Pardon," he said urbanely. "Could I trouble you for a match?"

The watcher searched his vest pocket and handed him one. Cole caught a full view of the fellow's face as he kindled his cigarette. The man was a stranger to him. Murmuring profuse thanks for the accommodation Cole walked away. Twenty minutes later, after a devious journey by foot, subway, and surface cars, he plunged into the traffic jam in the theatrical district. For a little while he darted in and out among surging streams of humanity. Then, certain that he had thrown the pursuer off his tracks, he boarded a southbound car. A tower clock was signaling the midnight hour just as he reached the appointed corner in Madison Square.

"You are very prompt," observed Miss Brown, as he stepped into the limousine in which his adventure had begun, exactly twenty-four hours ago. "You are sure you haven't been followed?"

"Only a short distance." Cole sat down beside

her, having a weird feeling that ages had passed since he last touched those cushions. "I shook off the fellow quite easily."

The car was gliding swiftly toward the south, but soon it began to turn and twist in all directions. The windows were shaded, and Cole could only guess which way they were going.

"You're an audacious person," murmured the girl. "After what happened last night I wasn't sure you would come with me a second time."

Cole smiled. "Audacious isn't quite the word."

"No, I suppose not. You're not the kind of man who indulges in foolish bravado. Your decision to come with me to-night was the result of long and careful thinking, after you left Doctor Latham's office. Your interview with the doctor convinced you that our acquaintance might be worth cultivating, despite the rough treatment you were given last night. Am I right?"

"In the main. You know, then, that I called on Doctor Latham?"

"Of course. You have been under constant surveillance since you left our establishment early this morning."

"How flattering! But you puzzle me, Miss Brown. I have been conscious of being watched only since dinner time."

She gave an amused laugh. "One is never conscious of our brand of espionage. We have men on our staff who have reduced shadowing to a fine art. They are not so easily shaken off as was the simpleton who stood outside your windows this evening. By the way, Mr. Cole, aren't you harbor-

ing a little resentment against me for my part in last night's affair?"

"Perhaps," said Cole dryly, "but curiosity is a stronger motive than resentment."

"You are not at all gallant. Lots of other men would have replied to that question with a flowery compliment."

"They would have been fools. You would have secretly despised them for it."

A little pause. "Thank you," she whispered, but the words sounded so faint that Cole was not sure he was expected to hear them.

The car had ceased its zigzagging course and was traveling in a straight line. Presently Miss Brown produced the scarf with which she had covered his eyes the previous night.

"I hope this is the last time I shall have to blindfold you," she murmured, as she folded the cloth into a bandage and covered the upper portion of his face. "Perhaps the next time——"

She did not finish the sentence. Just then the car stopped, and she guided him across the sidewalk and up the stone steps. In a few moments they were darting upward in the elevator. Again the wall opened at Miss Brown's touch on a hidden spring. As it closed behind them Cole had a hazy feeling of being shut off from the world. They walked a short distance down the corridor. Then a door opened, and once more he found himself in the room with the circular table. The girl vanished, and a voice bade him step forward.

He walked up to the table. The masked men seated around it looked gray and ghostly in the

dusk. He scanned the veiled faces closely as his eyes responded to the dim light. The black beard was not there; yet he counted seven faces. Evidently the surgeon was not wearing his disguise to-night.

"Very glad to see you, Mr. Cole," said a voice which he recognized. "The fact that you have returned is additional proof that we were not mistaken in you. Sit down."

Cole seated himself at the spokesman's side. His ears were keyed to catch any suspicious sound, while his eyes cautiously explored the dusk about him. His right hand hung loosely over the side of the chair, but it was ready to reach for his pistol at the slightest sign of danger. He was far from certain in regard to the intentions of the seven men, and he was determined not to be caught off his guard.

"Perhaps it will give you some satisfaction to know," the spokesman went on, "that you sent one of our men to the hospital last night."

Cole smiled faintly as he recalled the fight in the dark. His knuckles still showed bruises from the blows he had showered on his opponent before he was overwhelmed by superior numbers.

"He is a big, husky chap, and he knows how to put a lot of steam into his punch," the spokesman continued. "You pounded his face to a jelly. I don't think Sam will ever get over the humiliation. His mortification ought to soften the bitterness you naturally feel toward us. By the way, you called on Doctor Latham, as I suggested. Did the interview prove satisfactory?"

"It wasn't conclusive," said Cole guardedly.

"We didn't expect that. The doctor is too wily to permit himself to be caught so easily. But didn't your talk with him leave a strong presumption of guilt in your mind?"

"It convinced me that Doctor Latham knows something of what happened to Mr. Reeves."

"And to that extent it modified your skepticism in regard to us?"

"I am here," said Cole with a shrug. "Isn't that answer enough?"

"It is. You wouldn't have come back to-night unless something had happened to counteract the bad impression which you derived from your first visit. No doubt the balance is still against us, but you are willing to listen to what we have to say. Will you pay close attention while I state a hypothetical case?"

"My ears are wide open."

"Very well, then. First let me state a general principle. It must have occurred to you, Mr. Cole, that there is something radically wrong with the enforcement of our laws and the administration of justice. The jails are doing a thriving business, and many criminals are convicted every day in the year. With rare exceptions, however, they are the smaller fry. Too often the big rascals go unpunished, while the little fellows get it in the neck. The agencies of law and order are often powerless when dealing with criminals who perpetrate their malefactions on a large scale. Are you with me so far?"

"Go on," said Cole.

"The cause of this deplorable situation is obvious. The big rascal evades the law and goes scot-free, while the little fellow breaks the law and lands in jail. Or else the big rascal violates the law in such a clever manner that conviction is impossible. He has the best legal talent on his side. Brilliant and unscrupulous lawyers lie awake nights scheming how a powerful client might commit crimes with impunity. Often the big rogue has unlimited resources at his command. If he is in danger of getting caught a substantial bribe frequently lets him out, or he uses political or social influence to get clear of the danger. True, isn't it?"

"Unfortunately it is," said Cole, "but I don't see what all this——"

"Just a moment. I am getting to the point as fast as I can. You must have noticed that the police and other agencies are seriously handicapped in trying to cope with crime on a large scale. They are hampered by a number of things, inefficiency, corruption, political patronage, sometimes indifference on the part of the public. There are many honest and capable men among them, but their number is too small. Besides, the machinery of justice is too ponderous and cumbersome In its competition with crime it has the same handicap as a truck trying to compete with a roadster. But that isn't the worst of it."

"You're painting a gloomy picture," Cole observed.

"But you know as well as I do that it is true to life. The most serious phase of the situation is the fact that the law, in effect if not in theory, is

punitive rather than preventive. Our administrators of justice are too often content with locking the stable after the horse is gone. It may be a satisfaction to you, when your pocketbook is stolen and the money squandered, to see the thief go to jail, but it isn't doing you any material good. It may be gratifying to you to know that that particular thief won't steal any more pocketbooks for a while, but that isn't going to compensate you for your loss. The time to stop the crook is before the damage is done, and that's exactly where our police system falls down on the job."

"True enough," Cole admitted. "But what are you going to do about it?"

He fancied the spokesman was smiling, but he could not be sure. The others at the table had not spoken a word.

"There is the Carmody case, for instance," the other went on, without answering Cole's question directly. "It shouldn't be called that, for the professor is only a puppet, a dwarf in comparison with the men who are pulling the strings. You have barely scratched the surface of the case, so, no doubt, you are amazed at what I say. The so-called Carmody case is in reality one of the biggest swindles ever projected. It is being engineered by a group of brilliant and very powerful men who have enormous resources in brains and cash at the tips of their fingers. They are working in the dark, with the utmost secrecy and astounding cleverness. If the authorities at Washington knew what was going on, there would be a panic all along Pennsylvania Avenue."

"Why doesn't some one tell them?"

The spokesman chuckled deprecatingly. "If I should go to them with the story to-morrow they would demand proof, and I haven't any. That is, nothing that is tangible. I am positive of my facts, but proving them is another matter. In a case like this the proof can't be produced until the damage is already done. Having no evidence, I should probably be met with indifference or skepticism. Even if an investigation were made, it would be purely perfunctory. The investigators would kick up just enough dust to blind themselves and tip the conspirators off to their danger."

"But, if things are as bad as you say, something should be done."

"Something is being done, Mr. Cole, and that brings me to the hypothetical case I was about to state. Imagine a group of wealthy and public-spirited citizens, men of brains, aggressiveness, and imagination, who have banded themselves together for the purpose of correcting the condition I have just described. Let us say they have built up a small, compact and marvelously efficient organization, in comparison with which the government's ponderous machinery is like the truck trying to outdistance the roadster. This organization, unhampered by graft, political patronage, and red tape, and having unlimited resources at its command, becomes the secret ally of the police, the department of justice, and similar agencies. Its existence is practically unknown to all but its own members. Like the criminal whom it is endeavoring to combat, it works in the dark and silently. This in itself

gives it a tremendous advantage. You are beginning to understand?"

Cole nodded.

"This organization has a corps of brilliant operatives, each one tested and tried and found one hundred per cent honest and efficient. At its head is an executive of exceptional ability. All the resources of the organization are placed at his disposal. He is paid a salary so large that it should render him immune to all sorts of corruption and amply compensate him for the fact that his achievements never become known to the outside world.

"For a time all goes well. Now and then the police, or the authorities at Washington, receive a package from an anonymous source. They open it and dazedly peruse the contents. It is evidence gathered by some of the shrewdest detectives in the country and put into shape by the best lawyers obtainable. It is so thoroughly prepared that it will stand every legal test. All the authorities have to do is to hale the culprit into court and read the evidence to the jury. In all cases but one the verdict has been guilty."

"The exception," the spokesman went on in gritty tones, "was due to the dereliction of the executive at the head of the corps. Contrary to expectations and despite all the incentives which he had for remaining loyal to the organization, the man was corrupted by the other side. No doubt he sold his honor for a fortune. At all events he disappeared, and the case collapsed. It was necessary to find some one to take his place. This time the men at the head of the organization were determined to

make no mistake. The next executive must be not only efficient and fearless, but incorruptible as well. For once the leaders decided to let the ends justify the means and go the limit in testing their candidate. Well, they did go the limit. They tried him in acid, and he assayed twenty-four carats."

Murmurs of approval went around the circle. Every face was leveled intently in Cole's direction. For several minutes he had anticipated the trend of the spokesman's remarks, yet he started a little at the last sentence.

"Now you understand," the other continued. "For some time we have been satisfied in regard to your ability. Our secret investigation left us in no doubt on that point. Last night we learned that you could resist three of the most powerful forms of temptation imaginable—fear, greed, and a charming woman's tears. And not only that, but you also proved your superiority in a physical encounter, in addition to showing presence of mind and quickness of wit in a most terrifying situation. You scored one hundred per cent on every point. I am only sorry the test had to be so severe."

Cole sat silent for a time; then he shook the spokesman's outreached hand. "It's worth a lot to me to know that I am a twenty-four-carat man," he declared.

"Then you accept?"

Cole pondered while his glance swept the masked faces.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"We call ourselves The Unknown Seven. The name fits because nobody, not even our best friends,

know us in our capacity of secret allies of the authorities. It's possible you have seen some of us before."

He raised his arm, and each man at the table made a sudden motion with his hand. In an instant the seven masks had been removed. Then a glaring light shattered the dusk, and Cole looked in astonishment at the unveiled faces. Several of them were familiar to him from pictures that had appeared in the newspapers, in connection with weighty national or municipal affairs. He blinked his eyes in bewilderment and was about to say something when the door suddenly opened.

Miss Brown entered in great haste. She was pale and breathless, and Cole could see that something of a startling nature had happened. The seven men rose and bowed as she came up to the table.

"What is it?" asked the spokesman.

For a moment the girl's eyes rested on Cole's face. There was a mingling of questioning, suspicion, and reproach in them that bewildered him. Then she turned to the spokesman. "The red light is flashing on the indicator!" she breathlessly declared. "Some one is coming up the elevator!"

For a moment each man in the room stood rigidly still. Then came a shuffling of feet and scraping of chairs. Now and then an ominous mutter was heard. Then, with one accord, all glances turned threateningly in the direction where Cole stood.

CHAPTER IX

THE RED LIGHT

FOR a time no one in the room moved. Cole was both amused and puzzled by the hostile glances leveled in his direction. The attitude of The Unknown Seven had changed from friendliness to suspicion, with an abruptness that was almost ludicrous. Miss Brown's reference to a red light seemed to have turned them against him in a twinkling.

He could not understand. He looked at the spokesman as if expecting an explanation. Now, with the lights on and the mask removed, Cole thought there was something familiar about his face. It was hewn on rather rough lines, suggestive of a man of great strength and determination. The iron-gray hair curled a little. The mouth was firm and gave a trace of harshness to the face. The eyes, arched by upslanting brows, were clear and cold.

Just now those eyes were gazing fixedly at Cole. There was the faintest suspicion of a threat in them, he thought. He pondered for a moment, arranged a few scattered recollections, and then the man's name came to him. He was Grover Carlin, a criminal lawyer of high standing and great ability. Cole had once heard him make a masterly address to a jury.

Only a few moments had passed since Miss Brown had made her breathless announcement.

Now one of the seven men sprang toward the door, and the others followed. Cole and Carlin, walking side by side, brought up the rear. The foremost of the procession opened a door across the hall, and the others tumbled in after him. It was a large room, filled with desks and filing cases, but the first thing that caught Cole's eye was a globe of glass in which a red light was flashing at intervals of a few seconds.

"What does it mean?" he asked Carlin.

The lawyer gave him a sharp glance. "It means that a stranger is coming up the elevator," he announced shortly.

"Why a stranger? Couldn't it be one of your own men?"

"No. When our own men enter the private elevator they always throw a lever which prevents the light from flashing. The red light is a danger signal. The elevator is an automatic one, and it is impossible for a stranger to operate it unless he is acquainted with the mechanism. Our visitor must have got the hang of it, somehow. Mr. Cole, you are the only outsider who has been inside this establishment in weeks."

"Am I to infer that I am under suspicion?"

"Well, it looks rather queer."

Smiling, Cole watched the flickering red in the glass globe. "But you admitted yourself that I am a twenty-four-carat man."

The other nodded. "Yes, I know, but——"

"Perhaps you suspect I arranged to have myself followed here this evening?"

"Such a thing is conceivable."

"But the rest isn't very practicable. I never saw the elevator, much less learned how to operate it. I was blindfolded both times I came up in it."

"True, but you are a very clever man, Mr. Cole. Your performance of last night proved that. And the fact remains that you are the only stranger who has been inside this establishment in a long time."

The red flashes has ceased. Cole looked about him. Several of the men were glowering at him, while Miss Brown regarded him with a look of doubt and vague disappointment.

"What about the former executive you mentioned, the man who betrayed you?" he asked. "Isn't it possible that he is up to deviltry of some kind?"

Carlin shook his head. "The mechanism has been changed since he left us. Besides, he would know enough to turn the lever to prevent the light from flashing. It will be interesting to see whether our visitor knows how to operate the sliding panel in the wall. If he does, you will presently see a green light in the indicator.

It was evident that the lawyer was trying to be fair and withhold judgment, but Cole could see he was an object of grave doubt. The others in the room were intently watching the indicator, but now and then they glanced darkly at Cole. Several of them seemed loath to suspect him, and among them was Miss Brown; but apparently they could think of no other explanation for the mysterious intrusion than that he had played false with them.

Like the others he fell to watching the glass globe. The ceasing of the red flashes seemed to

indicate that the intruder had reached the top floor. Perhaps at this very moment he was searching for the hidden spring that controlled the panel in the wall. Cole felt a tingling suspense as he waited to see whether a green light would appear in the indicator.

"What can the fellow hope to gain by coming here?" he asked Carlin.

The lawyer gave him a searching glance, as if not quite sure that the question had been asked sincerely. "A lot," he said dryly. "There are papers in our files, evidence in the form of memoranda and legal documents, that certain parties would be willing to pay a great price for."

"But doesn't he realize that you won't give them up without a fight?"

"Usually only the watchmen are here as late as this." The lawyer gave Cole another dubious glance out of his cold eyes. "To-night and last night we have been holding special sessions on your account. Probably our unbidden visitor doesn't know that. If he is hoping that he will have only a couple of watchmen to deal with, there will be a surprise waiting for him as soon as he gets through the wall, if he does get through."

Evidently the intruder was having difficulties. For several minutes the indicator had been blank, but the glances of those in the room were drawn to it as to a magnet.

Cole's eyes traveled over the oddly assorted company. A few feet in front of him stood a retired financier, a multimillionaire, who had once been a power in Wall Street, and whose money was being

used unsparingly to fight corruption and vice. A little to one side was a philanthropist whose annual benefactions mounted into eight figures. Three or four of them were strangers to him, and among these was the surgeon, whose tall figure Cole easily recognized despite the fact that he had worn a disguise on the other occasions.

His mind was active while he studied the faces about him. Would the green light flash on the indicator? Who was the intruder, and was Carlin right in the surmise that the documents in the filing cases were the object of the mysterious visit? For a thief to sneak into an establishment of this kind looked like a piece of foolhardy daring to Cole. There were nine of them in the room, including Miss Brown and himself, and no doubt agents and operatives of The Unknown Seven were within calling distance. There was a lively tussle ahead of the prowler, if he should succeed in getting through the wall.

Ten minutes had passed since the red flashes stopped. Cole was beginning to think that the intruder had met insuperable obstacles. Perhaps he had in some manner learned how to operate the elevator, but had failed to familiarize himself with the mechanism that controlled the sliding panel in the wall. All the while, as these speculations ran through Cole's mind, he felt that Carlin was watching him out of the tail of an eye.

"Aren't you a bit hasty in turning to me with your suspicions?" he asked good-naturedly. "I may be a twenty-four-carat man, but I am not a worker of miracles, and I'd have to be one in order to

ferret out your secrets on such short acquaintance. What about your hired agents?"

"I trust them as I trust myself. They have been tested and found true."

Cole smiled engagingly. "Your experience with the renegade executive, whom you told me about, should have warned you that tests aren't always conclusive. Human nature is about as uncertain as April weather."

Carlin gave an assenting nod, but the argument did not seem to influence him greatly.

"How will you dispose of the rascal if he gets through?" was Cole's next question.

"That's a problem. Our success so far has been due largely to the secrecy with which he have surrounded ourselves. We have nothing to fear, and no great harm would be done if we should be found out, but we prefer to continue to work in the dark. So far our absconding executive seems to have kept his mouth closed, for nothing has leaked out about us. No doubt he is so busy spending his thirty pieces of silver that he has no time for gabbling. Besides, the scoundrel has a wholesome respect for us. He knows that The Unknown Seven has a long arm and a sturdy fist. If this fellow," with another glance at the indicator, "should get through the wall, we shall have to take measures to protect our privacy. If we find that he has the right stuff in him we may even invite him to join us."

Another five minutes passed. Some in the group showed signs of restiveness. One of them sug-

gested going out and collaring the prowler, but Carlin vetoed the idea, declaring it would be better to give the fellow a chance to show his hand.

The group resumed its silent waiting. A question occurred to Cole, one that he had been on the point of asking when Miss Brown's entrance interrupted the conversation in the other room.

"How is Mr. Reeves?" he inquired.

Carlin waited for several moments before he answered. "There has been no change in his condition in the past twenty-four hours," he finally announced.

"He is still here?"

The lawyer nodded. He did not seem very communicative on that subject.

"You know, of course," Cole went on, "that it isn't in strict accordance with the law for you to keep him here?"

A thin smile twisted Carlin's lips, but his only response was a shrug.

"My duty to my clients gives me an interest in the matter," Cole pointed out. "You are keeping Mr. Reeves a prisoner."

"By no means. Mr. Reeves is our guest, and so far he has not voiced any objections." He gave a grim chuckle. "Furthermore he is infinitely better off here than where we found him. He would probably have been dead by this time if we hadn't taken him away."

"From where?"

The lawyer's wintry gaze rested for an instant on his face. "From the residence of Professor

Carmody, as you probably either know or can readily guess."

"You kidnaped him?"

"Call it that if you like. We saved Mr. Reeves from certain death. Professor Carmody is the only one who has cause for feeling aggrieved at what we have done."

Cole nodded thoughtfully. He had kept Carmody under observation for some time, and of late he had noticed a change in him. He understood now why the professor had seemed excited and ill at ease the last few days. His comings and goings had been more frequent and there had been several signs of something unusual on foot about the house on Bleecker Street.

"So that you may feel quite reassured in the matter," Carlin went on, "let me tell you that Mr. Reeves is under excellent care. A specialist is studying his condition, and there's a chance, though a very remote one, that he may recover his mental faculties, wholly or in part. If he does, I fancy he will have a very entertaining story to tell."

He looked sharply at Cole just then, as if trying to measure the effect of his words, but Cole's face showed nothing but deep thought. He had obtained a glimpse into the working methods of The Unknown Seven, and he had found fresh proof of the efficiency and the resources of the organization. A splitter of hairs might not have found its methods strictly legal, but there was such a thing as the end justifying the means. Quite likely Carlin was right in saying tnat Reeves had been rescued from certain death at the hands of Professor

Carmody. Probably, too, a great deal more could be accomplished by this informal course of procedure than by strict adherence to the letter of the law. Cole was so deeply impressed that for the moment he forgot that he was under suspicion.

"If Reeves ever tells his story, I'd like to be there," he declared.

"You may have an opportunity to do so," dryly remarked the lawyer. "Until we have satisfied ourselves on one or two little points we shall have to ask you to remain here as our guest. In the meantime——"

A medley of mutters and hushed exclamations interrupted him. Instinctively Cole glanced at the indicator. A tongue of green flame was shooting up and down in the glass globe. Fascinated, he watched the darting flashes.

"Get back!" ordered Carlin, waving a hand at the men who stood huddled into a knot before the indicator. In his other hand gleamed the barrel of a pistol. Cole admired the ease and coolness with which he was taking charge of the situation. Following the direction of his pointing finger, the men crowded into a corner of the room. Miss Brown followed them, and, as she crossed the floor, she gave Cole a glance that stabbed within him.

Carlin touched a button; the room went dark. Keeping Cole close at his side he took up a position a few feet in front of the others. "I must warn you not to move," he whispered in Cole's ear.

"Have no fear," Cole whispered back. "I'm as anxious to see this through as you can possibly be."

The lawyer's strategy was simple. If the in-

truder's aim was to get hold of some or the documents in the filing cases he would probably come straight to this room. The fact that he had mastered the mechanism of the elevator and the hidden door seemed to indicate that he was fairly well familiar with the lay of the establishment. Evidently the lawyer's plan was to catch him red-handed and take him by surprise.

Cole was conscious of a growing disquietude as he stood beside the lawyer, looking in the direction of the door through which the intruder must pass. He had a hazy feeling that Carlin's plan was too simple, but he could not tell exactly what was wrong with it. Not a sound was heard in the room. The door had been left open a crack, and a narrow wedge of light filtered in, but most of the room was an impenetrable blur.

A minute passed. In vain Cole strained his ears to catch the sound of approaching footsteps. His uneasiness grew, but he could not understand why. As if his misgivings had been communicated to the lawyer, the latter mumbled something under his breath. The moments flew, and still no sound was heard in the corridor. Either the intruder's footfalls were thoroughly muffled, or else——

Cole did not finish the thought. A vagrant suspicion held his senses spellbound. For a moment longer he listened for footfalls that did not come, and then his vague apprehensions crystallized in a flash. He gripped the lawyer's arm so violently that Carlin gasped.

"You were wrong!" he whispered hoarsely. "The

fellow isn't after any papers. He came here to get Reeves."

Cole, with his hand tightly gripping Carlin's arm, felt a sudden shock shooting through the man at his side. In a twinkling the lawyer seemed to have grasped his meaning. Now, muttering something, he sprang forward. In an instant the lights were on again, and Carlin was running toward the door. Cole followed, but in a moment the two men came to a dead stop.

A short, piercing cry sounded. It died abruptly, leaving a curious emptiness in the air. The two men stared at each other, and Cole saw a gray film creep over the lawyer's face.

"Too late!" he exclaimed.

CHAPTER X

PURSUIT

THE scream had ended with a certain grim abruptness that to the listeners could mean only one thing. It had seemed to stop in the middle; yet it had been punctuated with an ominous finality. It was as if death itself had stepped in and placed an exclamation point after an unfinished cry.

Then came utter silence. It seemed as though every sound and every breath of life had been sucked out of the air. Carlin, his lips drawn apart at one side, looked fixedly at the door. His head, shoulders and chest were straining forward; he appeared to be maintaining his balance by sheer mental tension. A few moments passed, and then Cole shook himself free of the insidious horror that attacks even the strongest. Less than thirty seconds had elapsed since the cry sounded.

"Where is he?" he asked, shaking the lawyer's arm.

"He?" Carlin seemed to be trying to shake off a spell. "Oh, Reeves, you mean. Back there." He pointed indefinitely toward the corridor.

"Brace up, man!" Cole shouted. "Go to him. Maybe something can be done. Hurry!"

He bounded to the door and out in the hall. His words had voiced a hope that he did not feel. The cry had told him only too eloquently that Reeves was beyond help. But there might still be time to

catch the murderer, if he made haste. Heedless of Carlin's belated shout to him to stop, he hurried down the long and dimly-lighted corridor. Confused cries and scurrying footfalls sounded behind him, signifying that the others had come out of their temporary stupor.

Cole shut his ears to the bedlam. All he saw and heard was a shadow darting toward the end of the hall and a patter of swift feet. At the farther end of the corridor, at the point where Miss Brown and himself had entered the headquarters of The Unknown Seven, was an opening. He came up to it just in time to see the fleeing shadow slip through.

"Stop, or I'll wing you!" he cried, jerking his pistol out of his hip pocket, but the fugitive paid no heed. Crouching low, he ran with zigzagging motions across the open space toward the elevator shaft. Cole aimed low and pulled the trigger. The bullet thudded against the flagged flooring, and through the smoke he saw the fugitive spring into the cage. Already the door was clanking shut. He plunged forward and kicked his foot into the opening, just in time to stop the sliding door from closing. He caught a glimpse of a stiff felt hat, a sallow face with a mocking grin, a lean and slightly hunchbacked figure, and then the cage shot downward.

Cole, standing with his right foot caught between the door and the steel jamb, muttered a malediction, but it was aimed mostly at himself. The little hunchback had eluded him with an agility that aroused his admiration, even while it made him

grit his teeth. He flung the door wide open. Only a few moments had passed since the cage started downward, and it had not got far. There was something tantalizing about the swiftness with which it increased the distance between himself and the fleeing man.

For a moment Cole gauged his chances. He gazed at two sets of cables that glided up and down inside the shaft. His next move would have seemed foolhardy to an onlooker, but Cole had carefully measured the risk. It was one of those tense moments in which the mind leaps quickly to decisions. The time it took him to determine what to do was only a matter of seconds.

He flexed his muscles and then he leaped. For an instant his form hurtled through space, then his hands closed tightly around the downward gliding cable. He wound his legs about it and clamped it between his feet. The swift descent made him feel as if he were sucking ice-cold air into his lungs. The cage, some twenty-five or thirty feet below, was dropping like a rock, but now Cole was following at an equal rate of progress.

Ten floors slipped past, then fifteen, finally twenty. Cole's hands were raw and bleeding. Hot and cold flashes were chasing up and down his back. His lungs were straining, and a treacherous numbness was creeping into his limbs. He looked down at the roof of the cage and smiled. No doubt the fleeing man felt that his escape was already as good as accomplished.

The cage stopped so suddenly that the vibration of the cable almost made Cole lose his hold. He

slipped a little farther down, then checked his descent opposite the level of the second floor. The shaft was narrow, and he could easily reach the door with one hand, while he clung to the cable with the other. Installed for private and secret use the elevator equipment lacked several safety devices that would have acted as a hindrance to Cole. As it was the door slid open easily. Seizing the jamb with one hand he swung free of the cable and landed on the floor.

He felt a trifle dizzy, but the thrill of pursuit acted as a stimulant. Just around the shaft was a stairway, and he hurried down. Only a few moments ago a metallic clanking had signified that the fugitive was getting out of the cage. As Cole reached the lower steps he saw a long open space in front of him, and at its farther end he caught a glimpse of the hunchback, slipping out through the door. His ears caught the sound of throbbing motors, warning him that a car was waiting outside to speed the fugitive to safety. Conscious of nothing but the exhilaration of the hunter he bounded to the door and emerged on the sidewalk, just as a tail light gave him a mocking wink and disappeared around the corner.

There was a fine mist in the air. On all sides the tops of the tall office buildings reared their heads in a translucent haze. The streets, which in the daytime swarmed with humanity, were now deserted. Cole guessed that it must be about two o'clock, but he did not take time to look at his watch. The taunt of the tail light egged him on. He threw his head back and his chest out

and broke into a sprint. Rounding the corner at full speed he once more caught a glimpse of the jeering tail light. But it was only a glimpse, for a moment later it was out of sight.

Cole tried to run faster, but he realized that, unless something unforeseen happened, he was running a losing race. The car had the advantage in speed and endurance. With scarcely a stop, save for the possible interference of a traffic officer, it might travel all the way from one end of Manhattan to the other. He kept up the pursuit only because he hated to cry quits. Besides, as long as he could continue the chase, there was always the possibility that chance might come to his aid.

Once more he caught sight of the tail light, this time quite a distance ahead. Letting out the final ounce of energy he succeeded in quickening his speed a little. He ran and ran, but his breathing became alarmingly heavy. It would not be long before his wind gave out, but at least he would have the satisfaction of knowing that he had done his best. His gait was growing wabbly when the unexpected occurrence for which he had been hoping came along.

Not even a village street is quite so dead as is the financial section of New York in the small hours. Skyscrapers, towering in a jungle of silence and dim lights, give a majestic touch to a stillness that is seldom broken, save by the footfalls of policemen and private watchmen. To Cole, therefore, it seemed nothing but a stroke of luck that a taxicab should come along at that moment. He hailed the driver.

"See that car?" He pointed at the tail light twinkling in the distance. "Can you overtake it?"

"I'll try," said the chauffeur, peering at him from beneath the visor of his cap. "This is a pretty good old boat, though she ain't much on looks. Good for a fine if I get pinched?"

"Sure," said Cole easily, though not altogether unmindful of the slender roll in his pocket. He stepped in, and the cab jumped forward. It rattled and lurched and creaked in the joints, as if in imminent danger of falling to pieces, but he noticed with satisfaction that it had a surprising capacity for speed. It swerved and slithered at a giddy rate, at times almost jogging him out of his seat.

Pursued and pursuer wound their way out of the maze of chopped-up and tangled streets to the south of Washington Square. The car ahead swung into Fifth Avenue, at a slightly reduced speed, and the taxicab slowed down accordingly. From now on it was not only easier to keep up with the larger car, but there was also less danger of the fugitive becoming aware of pursuit, for, even at that hour, there was a sprinkling of traffic on the avenue.

It suddenly dawned on Cole that he was in a unique position. The capture of the hunchback now seemed certain, but what was he to do with the man after he had caught him? If he turned him over to the police, which seemed the proper and regular thing to do, he would be compelled to tell things which, in a sense, he was pledged not to reveal. Despite all that had happened and notwithstanding the harsh treatment inflicted on him, he had come away with a rather high opinion of The Un-

known Seven. They had trusted him, at least for a time, until the coming of the hunchback turned their suspicions against him, and Cole was not inclined to violate a trust.

Now, that he came to think of it, there was really very little he could tell, even if he were disposed to divulge what he knew. In a strict sense he did not know that the hunchback had murdered Reeves. For that matter he did not know that Reeves was dead. Though personally convinced on both points he could not tell a convincing story to the police, for he had neither witnessed the commission of the crime nor seen Reeves' dead body.

Still another thought came to him as he bobbed up and down and from side to side in the cab. He gave a short, dazed laugh. Even if he had witnessed the deed and seen the body he would have been unable to direct the police to the scene of the crime. His dizzying descent in the elevator shaft had left him a trifle giddy. He had rushed away in great haste, his whole mind fixed on the one idea that the hunchback must not be permitted to get away. In his hurry he had given no thought to the location of the building. He had strained every nerve and muscle in his efforts to keep the car in sight, and there had been no time to notice street signs. Like many a New Yorker, he had seldom had occasion to visit the financial section, and many of the streets in that district were nothing but names to him.

Though there was ample extenuation, Cole chided himself for a blunderer. He had missed

his chance to learn where the headquarters of The Unknown Seven was situated. The general boundaries of the neighborhood were a shade more clearly defined in his mind, but he knew scarcely more than he had known before. The rendezvous of the organization could be in any one of half a hundred buildings. Even if he should stumble upon the right one he doubted whether he would recognize it.

In the midst of his musings the cab stopped with a suddenness that jerked him out of his seat. He glanced out and saw that the hunchback's car had halted two blocks ahead. They were somewhere in the Sixties, and to the west were the black masses of the park. The hunchback was getting out and turning down the side street, but car and driver were proceeding north.

A suspicion was dawning in Cole's mind as he stepped out of the taxicab. It was rather odd that the chase should have ended at this particular point. He paid the chauffeur, adding a generous tip to the fare. He hurried to the corner where the car had stopped and swung into the side street, just in time to see the hunchback disappear in the shadow of a house. Cole hastened after him, stopping before a dark and somber house with a brownstone front.

His hazy suspicion was confirmed. It was odd how the scattered pieces of the mystery were beginning to dovetail. His pursuit of the hunchback had led him to the house of Doctor Dickson Latham.

CHAPTER XI

BEHIND THE LOCKED DOOR

THE moon was shining through a silver-gray mist, giving the row of buildings a shadowy appearance. A fresh fragrance drifted out from the park, on the scarcely perceptible breeze. A milk cart rattled down the block; otherwise the street was deserted.

Cole peered sharply into the dark basement entrance. He suspected the hunchback had entered the doctor's house that way. Down the steps he went and tried the knob, but the door was locked. The two windows on each side were protected by iron bars. He hesitated for a moment, and then he mounted the steps to the main entrance and rang the bell. There seemed to be nothing else he could do, and the shifty-tongued doctor interested him strangely. Latham's evasions would be entertaining, if nothing else.

He waited patiently, for he had many things to consider. Just what trend the forthcoming interview was to take he did not know. That the hunchback should have taken refuge in the physician's house was significant, especially since there were good reasons for supposing that Latham was responsible for the wrecking of Reeves' mind. That he had also instigated the murder of the maniac seemed only a reasonable sequence of the first supposition. In this connection Professor Carmody's

visit to the doctor's house yesterday was a highly interesting circumstance. Perhaps the two rogues had planned the murder then.

Cole rang again. At the same time he brushed all hasty inferences and surmises from his mind. He came back to the point that, as far as hard facts were concerned, he knew next to nothing. He did not even have a good reason for placing the hunchback under arrest. If he turned the fellow over to the police he would probably be only laughed at for his trouble. The hunchback would brazen out of it, and Cole would not have a leg to stand on. As for Doctor Latham——

He rang again more emphatically this time. Then he listened to the queer noises which the reverberations stirred up within the dark house. As for Doctor Latham, Cole could hope to do no more than draw the doctor out by deftly aimed questions. It was scarcely to be expected that such a slippery individual as Dickson Latham would betray himself, yet something might come of the interview. The doctor might get careless, or Cole might succeed in confusing him.

Once more he reached for the button, but just then a step sounded in the hall. The door came open. It was the doctor himself who admitted his early caller. It was dark where they stood, and Cole could see little else than a black beard and a long dressing gown, but he fancied there were signs of repressed irritation about the doctor, as he recognized his visitor.

"Ah, it's you, Mr. Stone. Please step in."

The voice was affable enough. Cole followed

him through the hall, the reception room, and into the physician's office. When they faced each other across the desk, Latham seemed to have recovered his usual ease of manners. "Nerves again, Mr. Stone?" he asked pleasantly.

"No; only a slight headache," said Cole.

"And you wish me to prescribe something?"

"Yes, but it isn't drugs I want. I came here hoping you would cure my headache by removing the cause. I have an acute case of flabbergastation."

Doctor Latham's bearded lips parted in a thin flash of very white teeth. Cole thought there was something Machiavellian about the smile. The physician reached out an arm and passed a box of cigars across the desk. A startled gleam flashed into Cole's eyes. The movement of the doctor's arm had wrinkled the sleeve of the dressing gown and exposed a narrow rim of the cuff of his pajama jacket. The cuff was pale blue, and just above the rim was a stain.

"I can recommend these perfectos," said Latham genially.

Cole, easily hiding his surprise, accepted one. The doctor struck a match, and the stain became visible once more, as he helped Cole to a light. It was a fresh blot of a dark tinge, probably not more than an hour old.

"What is it that flabbergasts you, Mr. Stone?" inquired the physician, after each man had pulled appreciatively at his cigar. The question was accompanied with a slight and seemingly casual glance at a door in the rear of the office.

The glance had not escaped Cole. He picked his words carefully. "Fifteen or twenty minutes ago," he began, "a man entered your house."

"Yes?" asked the physician in a toneless voice.

"A hunchback," Cole went on, guessing that the doctor had carefully hidden the fellow, while Cole had been kept waiting outside the door. "He entered your basement, unless I'm mistaken. Odd time for a call, doctor."

"A physician, as you undoubtedly know, receives callers at all hours. Nothing unusual in that."

"But you will admit that this fellow's mode of entrance was rather irregular? A physician's patients do not usually sneak in the basement way."

"Very true, but please come to the point, Mr. Stone. You must grant that I have a right to receive visitors any way I choose, even through the chimney, if it pleases my fancy. You tell me that a hunchback entered my house by the basement door. I neither deny nor affirm it, but, without wishing to seem rude, may I ask what it is to you?"

"Suppose the fellow were a criminal?"

"I never inquire into the moral character of my patients. Their physical welfare is all that concerns me."

"But suppose this individual had committed a murder? You would not care to harbor a murderer in your house, would you?"

A slight flicker of uneasiness showed in the doctor's eyes. "A murderer? Aren't you carrying your suppositions rather too far, Mr. Stone?"

Again he cast a sidelong glance at the inner door. Cole sensed a hidden significance in the doctor's at-

tention to that door. It puzzled him almost as much as did the stain on the cuff. He thought quickly, estimating how much he stood to gain or lose by a direct attack.

"I'm not supposing," he declared bluntly. "I know there is a murderer in your house."

"Oh!" The doctor's tone was tense and very low. "Whom did he murder?"

"Malcolm Reeves."

"Mal—Malcolm Reeves?" In an instant the physician had kicked back his chair and was on his feet. With the cigar tightly clamped between his bearded lips he stared hard at Cole. His eyes were bright as metal, but there was a glint of grave concern in their depths. In that moment Cole would have been ready to swear that Latham's consternation was genuine.

"Is Reeves dead?" asked the doctor hoarsely.

Cole gave him a level glance. "He was murdered less than two hours ago, and the murderer is in your house."

The physician stared for a moment longer. An indistinct mutter came from his lips. Cole wondered whether his face was not pale under the glossy black beard. Despite his bewilderment and his feeling that the doctor's emotions were sincere, he glowed inwardly with satisfaction. At last Latham's superb composure had been shattered; now he must pursue his advantage before the doctor could rally his mental forces and ply him with unanswerable questions.

"Doctor Latham," he asked quickly, "do you

deny that there is a hunchbacked fellow in the house?"

The doctor sat down again. "I don't feel called upon either to deny or affirm it," he declared.

Cole leaned forward across the desk. "How did that stain get on your cuff, doctor?"

The physician's arm was stretched out flat on the table, and Cole pointed to the soiled cuff. Latham looked down; for an instant, as he saw the blot, his eyes widened in astonishment.

"Oh, that!" He shrugged his shoulders. "I had a simple surgical case a while ago. It wasn't serious enough to take to a hospital, so I performed it in my own office."

"I didn't know physicians ever performed operations in their pajamas. No accounting for eccentricities, though. Will you do me a favor, doctor?"

"That depends. What is it?"

Cole pointed carelessly to the door at which the doctor had been covertly glancing from time to time.

"I would like to see what is behind that door, if you don't mind," he remarked languidly.

Again a gleam of uneasiness crept into the doctor's eyes. He regarded Cole intently, as if trying to ferret out the reason for the request. Cole, a thin smile on his lips, was puffing leisurely at his cigar.

"Why?" demanded the doctor.

"Just a fancy. You have no objection, I hope?"

The doctor drew himself up. He sat stiffly erect in his chair. A mask seemed to fall from his face. Dropping all pretense of geniality, his features took on a threatening look. "I don't care to humor your fancy, Mr. Stone," he declared coldly.

With excessive care Cole ashed his cigar. Then he got up and, with a slow, but firm, tread, walked toward the door in the rear. His fingers closed around the knob.

"Stop!" cried the doctor sharply.

Cole turned and gave him an amused glance.

"You are a detective, I suppose?" said Latham.

"In a way," admitted Cole modestly.

"Have you a search warrant?"

Cole shook his head.

"Then I must regard you as a trespasser. Mr. Stone, the moment you open that door you will be a dead man."

He reached into a pocket of his dressing gown. In the next instant a small pistol glittered banefully in his hand. He raised it till Cole could gaze straight into the muzzle. His eyes, as he looked ominously at him, emitted the same cold, metallic gleam as the barrel of the weapon.

Cole gave him a long, searching look, and he was a keen judge of faces. At the end of the inspection he shrugged. "Doctor Latham," he said evenly, "you haven't the nerve to kill me." He turned the knob and walked in.

CHAPTER XII

IN FOUR ROUNDS

IN stony silence Doctor Latham watched the bold move. As Cole opened the door, a diffident look came into his face. He toyed awkwardly with the pistol, looked dubiously at the barrel, finally put the weapon back in his pocket. "It seems you win this round," he muttered.

The room which Cole had entered was dark. His hand fumbled along the wall till he found a knob. At his pressure a light appeared, and it revealed a man sprawled out in a chair. Except that the coat had been removed he was fully dressed, and it seemed to Cole that he was sound asleep.

He recognized the sallow face of the hunchback, having caught a brief glimpse of it just as the elevator started. It was not a pleasant face. The twisted lips looked as though the teeth had been bared in a snarl just before the man fell asleep. Cole thought he might be a thug or professional gunman. He looked away and saw Latham in the doorway.

"You're a cool one," murmured the physician, a trace of admiration in his tone. "Didn't you know I was ready to shoot you?"

"You didn't," was the laconic answer.

Latham came closer. He was once more suave and genial. Cole fancied his astute brain was at work on a scheme of some sort. "Have you seen

enough to repay you for the risk you took?" he inquired. "Is this the man you are looking for?"

Cole nodded. "He's the one who murdered Reeves. Tough-looking customer! What have you done to him, doctor?"

The Machiavellian smile came back. "He was in a bad way. I had to give him a hypodermic. That's why his crime, if he committed one, doesn't seem to weigh very heavily on his conscience. What are your intentions in regard to my patient, Mr. Stone?"

Cole stepped closer to the recumbent man. The fellow looked indeed as though he were deep in drug-induced sleep. Cole raised the arm nearest him and turned back the shirt sleeve. A little below the elbow there was a small puncture. He dropped the limp arm and turned away. His head was full of perplexities and contradictions. A little while ago certain phases of the mystery had seemed to dovetail to perfection, but now things were taking an incrongruous turn. He felt the physician was inwardly laughing at his bewilderment.

"Well, Mr. Stone?" he inquired softly.

Cole was in a quandary, but he tried hard not to show it. For the present the wily doctor had several strategical advantages, and evidently he knew how to use them. It would not be easy to take the unconscious man away. Even if it could be done, Cole would not know where to take him. On the other hand, it would not do to let him get away, as he undoubtedly would as soon as he recovered from the effects of the drug.

"This man is my patient," continued the doctor,

"and I strongly advise against disturbing him for the present. I believe a physician's advice is usually heeded in such cases."

"Your patient seemed to be in excellent health a little while ago," observed Cole.

"Really, you must permit me to be the judge as to his physical condition."

Cole eyed him levelly. "You are a very clever man, Doctor Latham. I believe you deliberately drugged this so-called patient of yours so that he couldn't be removed. It was a fairly ingenious stroke."

Latham gave him a curious glance. "That's a very odd way of looking at the situation," he remarked thoughtfully. "I wonder if you aren't a bit disingenuous. However, it doesn't matter. This seems to be my round."

His faintly gloating tone nettled Cole. As far as he could see he was outmaneuvered on every point. Hopeless as the situation seemed to be, he was determined not to leave the house a defeated man. He rekindled his cigar, then gazed with mild reproach at the glowing tip. A cigar never gave him the mental stimulus that he derived from his musty old pipe at home. Besides, the doctor's slyly amused glances were disconcerting. Cole's thoughts would not travel in a straight line, and he grew more uncomfortable as he noticed that his helplessness was beginning to impress the doctor as queer.

He turned, placed the half-smoked cigar on a tray, and glanced through the open door leading into the office. The nickel trimmings of a telephone gleamed under the electric drop light over

the desk. The sight of the instrument seemed to give Cole an idea. Deliberately he walked into the other room and picked up the directory.

"May I ask what you intend doing?" inquired the physician, following him.

"I know a doctor who lives not far from here," said Cole absently, while he hastily turned the pages of the book. "I'm going to call him in for a consultation over your patient. If the fellow is in a bad way, two doctors are better than one. If there's nothing wrong with him, I want to know it. Ah!" his index finger halted in the center of a page. "Plaza 28826."

A faint mutter of dismay escaped the doctor. He stood at Cole's back, while the detective put the receiver to his ear.

"A consultation is quite unnecessary, I assure you," declared Latham.

Cole grinned into the transmitter. He suspected Latham would agree to bring his "patient" back to consciousness rather than have another physician called in. A thousand slight murmurs sounded on the wire, and then came the operator's brisk "Number, please."

Cole spoke the number distinctly. He expected Latham would yield rather than suffer a blow to his professional reputation, but the physician's cunning rendered the matter uncertain. And, even if his ruse succeeded, Cole would score only a temporary advantage. He was not yet sure what his next move was to be. While waiting for the connection he glanced over his shoulder. Latham,

hands clasped at his back, was walking back and forth.

Suddenly Cole's face went blank. A jarring noise sounded in his ears. In the next instant he knew he was holding a dead instrument in his hand. All sounds had abruptly ceased. He heard Latham's triumphant chuckle as he hung up the receiver.

"It appears the third round is also mine," murmured Latham, his bearded lips parting in a gratified smile. In his right hand he held a pair of steel nippers.

Cole gritted his teeth, but smiled complacently. "I would call it a draw," he said. "Your act of cutting the wire was a confession, doctor; a confession that you are up to deviltry. I knew it all along, of course, but I'm glad you showed your hand so plainly. It's an advantage to me to know that you have something to fear."

"I hope you derive a lot of satisfaction from it," declared Latham easily. "I fail to see how it is going to do you any practical good, though."

Cole himself was not quite clear on that point. It was a moral advantage rather than a physical one. He gazed steadily at the physician, studying the triangular outlines of the black, neatly trimmed beard. It was a bit tantalizing to consider how many shifting expressions that glossy appendage might conceal. It acted as a mask, and he was permitted to see through it only when the bearded lips parted in a flash of teeth. Just now the face told him nothing. It merely gave him an impression of a man of unfathomable secrets and a deeply

plotting mind. Cole felt at once baffled and fascinated.

"I am curious to know what you will try next," said Latham after a long pause. "I don't want to seem inhospitable, but I'm getting deucedly sleepy." He yawned ostentatiously. "If you have nothing further to propose——" He looked significantly at the door.

Cole considered for a moment longer, then he selected the most comfortable chair in the room and sat down. With a languid air he stretched out his legs and leaned back. "I am worried about your patient," he declared, with a sly wink at the room in the rear. "If you have no objection, I'll hang around till he comes to. This is a very comfortable chair. Could I trouble you for another of those excellent cigars?"

The doctor stood in front of him, and Cole fancied there was a frown beneath the beard. "You are going too far," said Latham severely. "Suppose I should throw you out?"

"That would be very rude, doctor. Besides, it couldn't be done."

Latham came a step closer. Slowly his crafty eyes moved up and down Cole's figure. Evidently he concluded that the languid appearance of the man in the chair was deceptive.

"I might summon help," he suggested.

"You might, but I hardly think you will. Being a prudent man, you realize it wouldn't do to stir up things. It's far preferable, from your point of view, to confine this interview to ourselves. What about another of those cigars, doctor?"

Latham did not move. His eyelids narrowed a trifle as he continued to gaze at Cole. "You puzzle me," he declared. "You come here representing yourself to be a detective, but your conduct is very peculiar. You say the hunchback in the other room is a murderer, but you have made no move toward arresting him."

"I am naturally lazy," confessed Cole blandly, "and it would be too much of an exertion to carry the fellow out of here on my back."

"Have you a warrant for his arrest?"

"None is needed," said Cole easily, though he perceived that the conversation was taking a dangerous turn. "It is enough that I have reasonable cause for believing that the man has committed a felony."

His tone faltered slightly on the word "reasonable." In his imagination he could picture the faces of the police officials, if he should undertake to tell them what had happened.

Latham continued his piercing scrutiny for a few moments longer. "You looked to me like an impostor," he declared. "I'll wager you haven't even so much as a pair of handcuffs on your person."

Cole jerked himself up straight in the chair. His twinkling eyes bespoke an inspiration. From his pocket he drew a small pair of steel links. "Small, but substantial," he said musingly. "A friend gave them to me once. I have so little use for them that I wouldn't carry them around except for the fact that they are so light and take so little space in the pocket. Once, in an unexpected pinch,

they proved handy, and I have been carrying them ever since."

He got up and briskly walked into the room in the rear. A muffled exclamation escaped the doctor, as Cole fastened one of the links around the hunchback's wrist. Then, with surprising ease, he lifted the man out of the chair and carried him to an operating table in a corner of the room.

"What are you doing?" inquired Latham sharply, too amazed at Cole's conduct to be able to interfere.

A short laugh was Cole's only answer. He stretched the unconscious man out on the operating table.

"Are you crazy?" spluttered the doctor. "What——" He stopped short as he saw Cole's intention, but now it was too late to act. Cole had placed the limp figure in such a way that the arm, from which the steel links dangled, was hanging down along the side of the table. In a twinkling he had fastened the other link around one of the iron legs. The unconscious man was now securely chained to the table.

Cole turned and regarded the physician with a good-humored expression. "My round, and it's as good as a knock-out," he observed.

Latham stared dumfoundedly. He saw what had happened, but he appeared at a loss to grasp the meaning of it. "What do you hope to gain by such tomfoolery?" he demanded.

"A lot," said Cole softly. "Your patient can't get away unless he takes the table with him, and that would attract attention. A fleeing murderer is under quite a handicap when he is chained to an

operating table. I notice it is all iron and strongly built. The legs are soldered to the top, so it won't be easy to take it apart. A skilled craftsman could do it, but I believe you have a strong aversion against calling in outsiders."

The cold gleam in Latham's eyes told that he understood. His gaze was fixed in a speculative way on the two steel links.

"They could be filed off," admitted Cole, guessing his thoughts, "but it would take a long time to get through the chilled steel of which they are made. An expert might be able to unlock them, but there again you are hampered by your prejudice against outsiders. You can't slip the link off the iron leg, for the braces down below prevent that. Barring accidents, I think my man will stay here till I'm ready to come and get him."

Doctor Latham seemed a trifle dazed. He ran his fingers awkwardly through his beard while looking bewilderedly at Cole. "You are an astounding person," he declared.

"You are another, doctor." Cole smiled engagingly. "Sorry to have interrupted your night's rest. Are you going to charge me for this visit? I believe it was ten dollars last time."

"Go to blazes!" said Doctor Latham. He stood motionless beside the unconscious man, while Cole walked out of the room.

CHAPTER XIII

THE MORNING'S MAIL

JUST as the clock struck eleven, the following morning, Kingdon Cole emerged in a tingle and glow from his cold shower. He had retired shortly before dawn, so he had considered himself entitled to sleep till a late hour, and now he felt the exuberant strength and freshness that make a man eager for work.

He stepped to the window, raised the shade, and looked out upon a gray and drizzly world. He scowled a little. Like all highly sensitized persons, he was easily susceptible to the weather. When the sky was clouded, his face was apt to wear a frown. When the sun shone, his face shone with it. A glance in the evening at the weather forecast could have told him what mood he was to be in the next day, granting that weather predictions were always accurate.

He turned from the window as Toots, with a plaintive "meow," rubbed her curled back against his leg. "Hungry?" inquired Cole, locking at the cat with an expression of grave responsibility.

Toots held her tail erect and seemed to think the question wholly superfluous. With a dutiful air Cole brought in the milk bottle, also two letters which he found outside his door. After a glance at the handwriting he tossed them on the table and proceeded to appease Toots' hunger. He went about it with all the awkwardness of an overgrown boy,

spilling a part of the milk beside the saucer, then stood aside and watched Toots lick it up.

Over his coffee and toast, a few minutes later, he started to read his mail. One of the letters was addressed in a strange feminine handwriting, and he opened it first. He suddenly stopped eating and took in the contents at a glance. The note read:

"Come back. I trust you. MISS B."

Beneath the signature was a row of X's. Cole counted seven of them; they were the insignia of The Unknown Seven, of course. It was gratifying to know that the mysterious Miss Brown still had faith in him, despite the suspicions of the other members of the organization, but her frankness puzzled him. If the others thought him guilty of duplicity, why did she not think likewise? She had seen and heard precisely the same things that the others had seen and heard. As far as he knew, she had no facts on which her favorable opinion of him could have been based. What, then, was the reason for her attitude?

"Woman's intuition, I suppose," mused Cole with a glance at Toots. "That probably accounts for it. But how does the charming Miss Brown expect me to find my way back to the headquarters of The Unknown Seven? To locate the building would be about as ticklish a job as finding a needle in a haystack. I don't see why she—— Yes, I do! She has naturally taken it for granted that I had sense enough to make a mental note of the street and number when I made my hasty exit last night. She doesn't know what a half-cocked idiot I am. Shucks!"

Cole made a wry face. Somehow he must manage to find the headquarters of The Unknown Seven. Unless he answered Miss Brown's summons, she would naturally suppose that her faith in him had been misplaced and that he was remaining away because of a sense of guilt. Cole resolved he would canvass every block in lower Manhattan before permitting such a thing to happen. How to go about it was another matter, however. A systematic search would eventually lead him to the building, but that would mean a waste of valuable time. He must find the headquarters of The Unknown Seven without delay, not only because Miss Brown had faith in him, but also for the more practical reason that he would not know what to do with the hunchback until he had positive knowledge of Malcolm Reeves' death.

He had no fear that his prisoner would escape from Doctor Latham's house. He had left the hunchback in a predicament from which the astute physician would not be able to release him without a great deal of difficulty; but Cole did not depend on that alone. Tony Pinto, a ragged urchin whose habitat was the picturesquely squalid section around Chatham Square, was watching the doctor's residence. Cole, who had earned the lad's everlasting gratitude by once doing him a small service, had instructed him to keep a sharp eye on the place. Tony had the wits of a fox and the legs of a deer, and a great ambition to become a detective. If an attempt should be made to spirit the hunchback away, Tony would find it out and report to Cole instantly.

Finishing his breakfast he lighted his pipe and composed himself for hard thinking. The tobacco smoke grew so thick in the room that Toots blinked at him reproachfully. Suddenly an idea came to him. He recalled having heard Grover Carlin say that a number of the members of The Unknown Seven had offices in the building. Cole had recognized several of the members, the previous evening, from photographs that had appeared from time to time in the newspapers, in connection with their social and financial activities. Right here was a clew to the location of the headquarters.

He picked up the telephone directory and found the name of Vincent de Witte, one of the men whom he had recognized. He glanced at the financier's office address, and he saw his clew slipping out of his fingers. The address was somewhere in Union Square, much too far north to be anywhere near the building he was searching for. Next he looked up the address of Stephen Aldrich, but with no more success. The philanthropist's offices, according to the directory, were in the Times Square district.

Cole tried two other names, then tossed the book away in disgust. It came to him that men like De Witte and Aldrich were engaged in multifarious enterprises and probably had two or more suites of offices in different sections of the city. Likely as not the business enterprises which they were conducting in the headquarters building were under corporate names, not generally known to the public. It was not to be expected that men so shrewd as The Unknown Seven had proven themselves to be

would leave even the remotest clew to the location of their rendezvous. Cole saw he must try something else.

He gazed hard into the monkey's face graven into the bowl of his pipe. What with the drizzle outside and the chaotic condition of his mind, he scowled into the tobacco haze that surrounded him. Why the deuce hadn't Miss Brown telephoned him instead of mailing him a letter? Why was it that women of her type were so prone either to underrate or overrate the intelligence of the sterner sex? They never accepted men at their true valuation, but their opinions were always colored by bias of one kind or another. Cole squinted at Toots while these thoughts ran through his mind. He had a distinct impression that that dainty specimen of femininity always regarded him with a sort of lofty tolerance. Miss Brown, on the other hand——

Suddenly he remembered the other letter. At first glance he had recognized the cramped hand of Hector Englebreth's secretary. He snipped off the margin of the envelope. Without doubt the letter contained a sharp reminder that Cole had promised to give his client a supplementary report on the condition of Malcolm Reeves. He anticipated a crisply phrased note as he drew out the inclosure. Then a surprise came to him. The envelope contained not only a letter, but a check besides. It was for a generous amount. Evidently his client had sent him something on account. Thoughtful of Englebreth! Cole put the check aside and glanced at the note, and then he received a second surprise. He read:

"Dear Sir: Mr. Englebreth desires me to notify you that he no longer requires your services. Inclosed please find check for services rendered to date."

Cole stared hard at the few typewritten lines. The stiffly worded communication was signed by Hector Englebreth's secretary. The prim type and the severe plainness of the engraved name and address in the upper left-hand corner seemed to convey a breath of the heavy, tomblike atmosphere that pervaded the Englebreth house.

He chuckled lightly as he flung the letter aside. It was not the first time that his independent conduct had lost him a client, and the fact that he was now cut off from all official contact with the Reeves mystery did not worry him in the least. There was nothing to prevent him from attacking the problem on his own account. The curt dismissal puzzled him, however. He wondered what he had done to displease Englebreth. His client's warning, spoken just as Cole was leaving the somber old house the other day, flashed across his mind.

"Be careful," Englebreth had said.

The words had had a cryptic sound. Cole had wondered at their meaning then, and he wondered now. Had Englebreth dismissed him because of his failure to heed a warning which he had not understood? Once before it had occurred to him that perhaps his client had learned, in some mysterious manner, of his relations with The Unknown Seven. Was that what had been in Englebreth's mind when he uttered that strange warning? Did his client suspect that Cole was betraying him by conduct-

ing secret negotiations with an enemy? The idea did not seem very plausible, but he could think of no other solution. On the whole he felt Englebreth had treated him rather shabbily. He had worked hard and loyally on the case. The abrupt dismissal was, in reality, a reflection on his honesty. In his resentment he resolved to demand an explanation of his former client.

He glanced dubiously at the telephone, recalling that on several occasions Englebreth had expressed a dislike to holding conversations over the wire, and he decided that an interview, face to face, would be more satisfactory. He poured out another saucerful of milk for Toots, and half an hour later he was ringing the doorbell of the Englebreth house on Fifth Avenue.

The drizzle and the leaden sky conferred an added touch of melancholy upon the dismal mansion. The chill, which he always felt on entering the house, had a keener edge this time. The rooms, with the window shades lowered as always, seemed darker and more oppressively silent than usual. The manservant who admitted him regarded him with an air of thinly veiled suspicion.

"I'll see if Mr. Englebreth is at home, sir," he announced. His feet made no sound as he crossed the thickly carpeted floor and passed through a door that turned silently on its hinges. In a few moments he was back. "Mr. Englebreth is not at home," he declared, dropping the habitual "sir."

Cole got up from his chair and gave the servant a playful poke in the ribs. It was a grotesque

piece of levity in that house of frigid dignity, but he could not resist the temptation.

"You're a cheerful liar," he told the man. Then, while the servant gaped after him in a scandalized way, he strode to the door of the library and pushed it open. In his wheel chair, beside the black walnut table, sat Hector Englebreth. A faint color tinged his white face as he saw the detective.

"Good morning, Mr. Englebreth," said Cole genially, and he drew up a chair and sat down. "I know that 'not at home' is a polite way of saying 'get out,' and so I walked right in. Hope you don't mind."

Englebreth leaned forward in the chair and scowled forbiddingly. His long white fingers beat a restless tattoo on the table. "Why have you come?" he demanded. "Did you not receive my letter?"

"I did, and the check, too. Many thanks. The check was quite satisfactory, but the letter left too many things unsaid. I am here to ask you why I am being fired off the job."

Englebreth glanced meaningly at the door. Instead of the long dressing gown which he usually wore, he was dressed in a suit of plain gray.

"I shall be going out in a few minutes," he declared stiffly.

"It won't take you long to answer my question. Don't you think I am entitled to an explanation."

"Of course, if you insist. I instructed my secretary to write you after I had consulted my wife about the matter. Since it is her brother's life that is at stake, she is more vitally concerned than I am,

so I thought it only proper that she should have her say. After I had placed certain facts before her, she agreed with me that your usefulness to us is past."

"Certain facts? What were they?"

"I think you know," said Englebreth in a hard, dry tone. His deep-set eyes, oddly brilliant in contrast to his pale face, regarded Cole accusingly. "I am disappointed in you, Mr. Cole. You impressed me as an upright, honest man, and I had hoped for better things from you. One of the harshest experiences in life is the discovery that one has placed his trust in a person who isn't worthy of it."

Cole's face hardened, and there was an ominous gleam in his eye. "I think you had better explain that statement, Mr. Englebreth," he said with slow emphasis.

Englebreth shrugged. "You are not candid with me. You know quite well what I mean, so why pretend? For instance, can you look me straight in the eyes and tell me that you gave a full and truthful report when you were here the other day?"

"It was truthful," said Cole, "and as complete as I could make it under the circumstances. If I did not tell quite all I knew, it was because I was uncertain in regard to some of the facts."

A wraith of a smile twisted Englebreth's thin lips. "And what about the warning I gave you? I hoped it would serve as a hint that I was aware of certain mysterious movements on your part. Why did you disregard it?"

A long silence ensued. Each man gazed sharply

into the other's eyes. There was a glint of steel in Cole's, a look of stern reproach in Englebreth's.

"Well?" said the invalid. The pale, mirthless smile was still hovering about his lips. "What have you to say, Mr. Cole?"

"You have been spying on me evidently?"

"You are using an unpleasant word. I have merely verified certain suspicions that concern you. I have also discovered certain facts which you have seen fit to conceal from me, facts which have a direct bearing on the fate of my brother-in-law. I don't think there is anything further to be said."

Cole got up. He could not understand where, or by what means, the invalid had obtained his information, but it was evident that Englebreth's mind was made up, and that no amount of argument could make him change his views.

"You are wrong, Mr. Englebreth," he said evenly. "A lot of queer things have happened, things I don't understand myself. But, believe it or not, I have played fair with you from beginning to end. Some time before long I hope to prove it to you."

"Indeed!" said Englebreth. "I am sure it will be interesting."

His tone and the smile that accompanied the words made Cole instinctively clench his fists. Then he turned away, before his anger should get the better of him, and hurried from the house. Out in the drizzle and under the gray sky he shook off his resentment and laughed at himself. It was ridiculous that a peevish old invalid should make him lose his temper. Some day, when he had probed the Reeves affair to the bottom, he would

make Englebreth eat his words. Just now he had more important things to consider than the aspersions of an infirm old man.

He crossed the street and was about to board a bus when he chanced to look back and saw a large car draw up in front of the house. A moment later the massive front door opened, and two servants appeared, carrying Englebreth between them. They assisted him into the car, and Cole gazed speculatively after the vehicle, as it glided away down Fifth Avenue. It was a rare thing for Englebreth to venture beyond the gloomy confines of his house, and Cole wondered where he might be going. Perhaps he was about to get into touch with his mysterious source of information. In that case Cole might learn a great deal by following him.

"Taxi, sir," said a voice, and a cab slowed down at the corner where he stood. Cole's hesitation lasted only a moment longer.

"Follow that green car over there," he directed. The chauffeur nodded, and Cole jumped in. The pursuit proved long and devious; again and again Cole chided himself for wasting valuable time. Then the green car stopped in front of an office building, and the chauffeur went inside. Cole dismissed the taxi and took up a position across the street. From where he stood he could catch an occasional glimpse of Englebreth through the partly shaded window of the car.

"Guess I'm chasing a wild goose," he glumly told himself.

Englebreth's chauffeur reappeared, accompanied by another man, and the two lifted the invalid from

the car and carried him inside the building. Slowly Cole started to cross the street. The man assisting the chauffeur seemed to carry his part of the burden awkwardly, and Cole could hear the infirm man's peevish protests. The two men entered an elevator with their load, and the cage started upward, just as Cole stepped inside the building.

A strange, unaccountable feeling came over him as he gazed after the disappearing lift. He was conscious of a faint tingling from head to foot. With an abstracted look in his eyes he gazed upward, then to the sides. He moved about along the row of elevators, and even his footfalls had a curious sound, a sound that he seemed to vaguely recognize. The elevator starter approached and inquired what he was looking for, but Cole only shook his head in a preoccupied way.

Suddenly he laughed aloud. In a twinkling all his confused impressions clarified. Once more he glanced upward. He knew, though he could not tell why or how, that far overhead was the rendezvous of The Unknown Seven.

CHAPTER XIV

COLE'S RUSE

COLE'S conviction that he had found the building occupied by The Unknown Seven was a matter of instinct rather than reason. He felt that once before, and not so long ago, his feet had trod the squares of stone that composed the floor. The surroundings had a remotely familiar appearance; perhaps he had subconsciously caught a glimpse of them as he rushed out in pursuit of the hunchback. Along the wall opposite the elevators was a row of small shops, a cigar store, a haberdashery, a news stand, and, on the corner, the office of a broker. Cole glanced at the signs, and they stirred hazy recollections in the back of his mind.

There could be no doubt of it; chance and Mr. Englebreth had led him to the very place he had been most anxious to find.

On the wall in the back was a directory of the tenants. "Security Building" it said at the top, and the very name smacked of conservatism, stability, and decorum. It spelled efficiency and prose and left the imagination untouched. It hinted of things far removed from the secret activities of the group of strange men who occupied the top floor. He ran his eyes down the names of corporations and individuals, but there was none that interested him. Among the former were probably several in which members of The Unknown Seven were concerned, but he had no means of identifying them.

He turned away and grinned sheepishly, as he noticed that the elevator starter was squinting at him in a suspicious way. There were five elevators, but, after he had seen them all come up and down, he knew that none of them was the automatic one used privately by the members of the organization. For a time he was puzzled. At the farther side of the shaft was a door marked "Private," and beyond this a flight of stairs. No doubt they were the same stairs he had rushed down the night before, after stopping his dizzy descent at the second floor.

But it was the door between the stairs and the shaft that claimed his interest. The single word, "Private," stenciled in black letters on a golden-brown surface, piqued his curiosity. It was plainly a hint to strangers to keep out. Signs of that kind had held a strong fascination for Cole ever since he was a boy. It was just as if some one had dared him to pass through the forbidden door. He tried it furtively, though well aware of the starter's oblique scrutiny. It was locked, as he had expected, but the word, "Private," continued to tantalize him. What could be on the other side of the locked door? The office of the superintendent of the building, perhaps. Or, maybe, the establishment of a mail-order concern that did not care for personal relations with its customers. On the other hand it might be only a storeroom where the scrub women kept their mops and brooms and buckets. All these guesses seemed plausible enough, but Cole strongly suspected something entirely different. Unless he

were greatly mistaken, the door was the entrance to the private elevator.

Wishing to verify his surmise, he walked up to the starter and, in a tone which might have signified that he was an agent for the building department or the inspector of an insurance company, inquired by whom the private door was being used.

"A bunch of nuts," said the starter, moved to loquacity by Cole's official air. "They come an' go at all hours. They's some big bugs among 'em, too. Guess they belong to wunna them secret societies."

Cole tried to learn more, but the man became suddenly tight-lipped and referred him to the superintendent of the building for further information. "It's agin' my orders to talk about the tenants," he added.

Cole nodded understandingly and stepped aside. The locked door seemed to bar further progress for the present. Just then he remembered his original errand. He had almost forgotten Englebreth. The cage into which he had seen the invalid carried had just reached the ground floor and was disgorging passengers. Cole waited till it was ready to make another trip, then stepped in and slipped a small bill into the operator's hand.

"You carried up a crippled person some ten or fifteen minutes ago," he said in an undertone. "Where did he go?"

"Oh, him!" The operator grinned as he stuffed the bill into a pocket. "He comes here every now and then. You'll find him in 2512, sir. It's the top floor."

Cole got out on the twenty-fifth floor. To all

outward appearances it was, indeed, the top floor of the building. The elevator shaft terminated in a blank ceiling, and the stairs in the back extended no higher. It was somewhat tantalizing to know that directly above him, and yet completely out of reach, was the rendezvous of The Unknown Seven.

Cole paused outside the door numbered 2512, but he did not knock. He could think of no pretext for seeking another interview with Englebreth. The office, as was indicated by the sign on the frosted glass, was occupied by the Bureau of Civil Research, and he made a mental note of the fact. He could see no particular significance in Englebreth's visit to a place of that kind. No doubt the Bureau of Civic Research was one of the numerous activities that his former client cultivated as a hobby. As far as his original purpose was concerned it looked as though Cole had wasted his time, but there was consolation in the fact that he had incidentally found the headquarters of The Unknown Seven. For the moment, however, he did not see how he was to profit by his discovery.

He descended, cast a mildly baffled glance at the private door, and went out to lunch. It seemed as if there was nothing for him to do but loiter in the vicinity of the building and wait for one of the members to appear. Idleness irked him, however, and he disliked the thought that such a small thing as a locked door was standing in his way. He cudgled his brain for an idea, as he strolled out of the restaurant.

Suddenly he found one, and he walked two blocks and ducked into a subway entrance. Soon he was

aboard an uptown train, bound for Doctor Latham's residence. He suspected that in the pockets of the hunchback he would find a key that would unlock the door. If his guess had been correct, and the door opened into the elevator used by The Unknown Seven, then the hunchback must have passed through that very door the previous night. He could not have done so unless he had a duplicate key. He might have thrown it away, of course, but the chances were that it was still in his possession.

Cole looked sharply about him as he walked down the block in which the doctor resided. He knew Tony was lurking somewhere in the neighborhood, but the youngster had a surprising knack at making himself inconspicuous when the occasion demanded it. He rang the doctor's doorbell and was told by the white-capped attendant who admitted him that the physician was engaged with a patient. Cole waited in the reception room. Evidently Latham did not permit his other enterprises to interfere with his practice, for several patients were waiting to consult him.

Presently the door opened, and the doctor arched his brows as he saw Cole in the waiting group. After a moment's hesitancy he motioned him to enter the consulting room.

"How is the patient, doctor?" inquired Cole briskly, glancing at the door in the rear.

Latham stroked his glossy beard. "As well as can be expected, considering the awkward position you left him in. He has difficulty getting about."

"Then you have not yet succeeded in extricating him from his embarrassing predicament?"

"Oh, no!" said the doctor with a dry laugh. "I haven't even tried. I just removed him to one of the spare bedrooms upstairs. He was in the way down here. You wish to have a talk with him, I suppose? I fear it is impossible. He grew hysterical a while ago, and I had to give him a sedative."

"It doesn't matter. I just want to look at him."

Latham gave him a queer glance, then he smiled knowingly. "I see," he murmured. "You wish to make sure that he hasn't escaped, despite the handicap you imposed on him. This way."

He opened a door and preceded Cole up a flight of stairs. They entered a room, and Cole saw the hunchback stretched out on the operating table and sound asleep. The physician watched him narrowly as Cole stepped up to the recumbent man and began to explore his pockets. A blank look came into the doctor's eyes when Cole, with a murmur of satisfaction, extracted a key.

"As I observed once before," said Latham, "you are a most astounding person. I wonder what the significance of that key might be."

"Every key has a mission, doctor, and that is to unlock some door."

The physician regarded him thoughtfully. "I don't understand you at all. You do such unexpected things. I am still wondering what your intentions are with respect to my patient."

"For the present my only concern is that he shan't get away."

The doctor pondered for a few moments longer, then he shrugged his shoulders, and the two men walked down the stairs in silence. As they reached the consultation office and were about to pass into the outer room, Latham paused with his hand on the doorknob. "Would it surprise you very much," he asked in slow, incisive accents, "if I were to tell you that I am just as anxious as you can possibly be that the fellow upstairs shan't get away?"

Cole's eyes opened wide. "No, it wouldn't surprise me. I would simply be unable to follow you. You are a deep one, doctor; nothing that you could say or do would startle me."

Latham's face relaxed in a smile. "I construe that as a compliment. Please appease my curiosity on one point. You have taken extraordinary precautions against my patient escaping, but what about myself? Aren't you afraid that I might run away?"

"I am not," said Cole emphatically. "You are not the kind that runs away. You work by subtler means than that. Where men of coarser mentality would kill an undesirable person, you merely render him harmless. If, later on, it should prove absolutely necessary to remove him, you hire another man to perform the nasty job. Your sensitive soul shrinks from vulgar tactics and sordid actons. For the same reason you don't run away from danger. Instead, you plan your moves so carefully in advance that the risk is reduced to the lowest possible minimum, and flight becomes unnecessary."

It was a rather blunt speech, and Cole had spoken so plainly only because he wished to watch the effect on the doctor. In the end he was disap-

pointed. The expansive beard concealed all outward signs of emotion; the face was no more expressive than a wooden image. For just a moment the eyes shone with a cold gleam, but that was all. When Cole had finished, the bearded lips parted in a pleased smile.

"Thanks," murmured Latham. "Too bad we appear to be enemies. I like you immensely—I really do."

He held the door open and Cole went out. As he walked toward the subway he was almost inclined to share the doctor's regret that they were enemies. There was something at once attractive and repellent about Latham. His subtleties, his cool audacity, and his flashing wits made him a charming personality, and there was a certain fascination even about his cold cynicism and conscienceless manner. Cole came away from the doctor's house with a spell hanging over him. But, aside from these things, there were phases of Latham's character that he could not understand. Stray remarks, which the doctor had dropped, and certain telltale gestures and mannerisms lingered in his memory while he rode downtown.

"A fascinating riddle and a highly accomplished villain," was his way of summing up the doctor's many-sided personality, as he got out of the subway and turned toward the Security Building.

He entered and, key in hand, walked direct to the private door. The elevator starter gave him an astonished glance, but did not interfere. The key fitted easily. Cole opened the door and stepped in, then quickly closed it behind him. He was in

a narrow cage, with a small electric bulb at the top. He looked about him in bewilderment, for there was no sign of any apparatus by which the elevator could be started. Carlin had told him that there was a peculiar mechanism that could be operated only by the initiated, but all Cole saw was a dial with figures along the rim and a knob in the center. It looked like the combination lock of a safe.

He twirled the knob back and forth, but without result. He tried several different combinations on the dial, but the elevator refused to budge. With ingrained stubbornness he persisted in his efforts, but in the end he was forced to confess that the task was beyond him. He was on the point of getting out when a key grated in the lock. A moment later the door came open, and Miss Brown entered the cage.

She started slightly as she saw him. Cole looked at her, and his frown melted. She was simply, but charmingly, attired in a tailor-made suit of some soft, gray material the name of which was not included in Cole's vocabulary.

"Oh, you came!" she exclaimed.

"Yes, but I didn't get very far." Cole regarded her with a half humorous, half reproachful glance. Her plain little hat set off to perfection the lily-white complexion and the hair like ruffled sunshine. "How did you expect me to manipulate the contraption?"

"I didn't really expect you to," she told him, while she whirled the knob back and forth a num-

ber of times. "In fact, I was sure it would stump you, but the others had their doubts on that point."

"I see," said Cole dryly, as the cage rocketed upward. "If I had shown that I knew how to operate the mechanism I would have convicted myself of duplicity, and the suspicions of the others would have been confirmed. But don't you see that a man who is clever enough to ferret out secrets while blindfolded would not betray himself so flagrantly?"

There was a twinkle of mirth in her deep-blue eyes. "Clever men are often vain. You might have construed my note as a challenge to your dexterity. It wasn't that, of course. It was only a test of your honesty."

"And now you are convinced?"

"I was practically convinced before, but the others needed proof."

"What convinced you?"

The blue eyes regarded him shrewdly, almost impersonally. Cole was reminded of a biologist watching a controlled experiment.

"I am seldom mistaken in matters of that kind," she said simply.

The cage stopped. As they got out, Cole abruptly asked the question that had been uppermost in his mind all the time. "What about Reeves?"

"Dead, stabbed through the heart. He was breathing his last when we found him."

Cole nodded grimly. Miss Brown's words had merely confirmed something of which he had been practically certain. They had gone through the hidden door in the wall by this time and were now in the corridor. They passed several men who bowed

respectfully to Miss Brown and cast hard glances at Cole. The woman opened a door, and they entered the large room with the filing cabinets and the glass globe, the room in which Cole had been the night before.

At a desk, with iron-gray head bent over a stack of papers, sat Grover Carlin. The lawyer looked up as they entered, and a faint smile flitted across his rugged face and tempered the cold gleam in his eyes. "Glad to see you, Mr. Cole," he said in measured tones. "I am also pleasantly surprised. Your abrupt departure, just after the murder last night, looked pretty bad."

"I was rather surprised that you didn't try to stop me."

Carlin grinned apologetically. "No one thought of doing so until it was too late. Everybody, including myself, were stricken senseless by the murder. We couldn't realize that such a thing had happened right here in our midst. It seemed unbelievable. All we could think was that you were——"

"In cahoots with the murderer," suggested Cole when the lawyer paused. "Well, I admit it looked strange. That murder was about as nervy a piece of rascality as I ever heard of. The fellow came here determined to carry out his purpose or die in the attempt. Doesn't his reckless audacity and the ease with which he got into your establishment suggest something to your mind, Mr. Carlin?"

"Oh, yes a number of things. It suggests that he had powerful influences behind him. The motive isn't far to seek. The men responsible for

the murder feared that Reeves might recover from the effects of the operation and divulge certain facts which would be to their detriment. They decided to prevent that by silencing him forever."

"What else?" asked Cole, eying the lawyer steadily.

Carlin gave him a quizzical glance.

"'How do you suppose the fellow got in?" Cole went on. "Where did he get the duplicate key to the elevator door? How did he get hold of the combination that controls the mechanism? Who told him how to get through the wall? How do you explain that, after entering, he walked straight to the room where Reeves was? As you probably remember, we heard the cry only a few moments after the green light had flashed, showing that the murderer knew his way thoroughly."

Carlin gazed at him hard and long. "Well?" he asked at length.

"Perhaps you still suspect me?" asked Cole lightly.

"No." The word came a little uncertainly. "I never really suspected you. I only had certain doubts about you, doubts which were natural under the circumstances. Your return here this afternoon speaks volumes. You would scarcely have come back if you had been playing us false. I feel I owe you an apology."

"It's accepted," said Cole with a laugh. "But apologies aren't going to remedy matters. Mr. Carlin, there's a traitor among you."

Miss Brown, seated near by, caught her breath. The lawyer thrust his head forward a little. "Impossible," he said. "There was a traitor among

us, as I explained to you, but we got rid of him. For all I know he may be dead by this time. I am ready to swear to the reliability of every man on our staff."

Cole seemed inclined to argue the point, but he desisted. His eyes twinkled a little, and he looked as though he were content to let developments prove the truth of what he had said.

"There is one thing you haven't explained, Mr. Cole," said Miss Brown. "I am curious to know how you got into the elevator a little while ago. Where did you get the key?"

"Oh, the key," said Cole lightly. "Why, I found it in the murderer's pocket."

Carlin and Miss Brown looked at him in speechless astonishment.

"I seem to be telling things backward," Cole went on. "After I left here early this morning I gave the fellow a chase and caught him. He's a hunchbacked, dried-up wisp of a man, and as evil looking a specimen of humanity as I ever saw."

Carlin blinked his eyes bewilderedly and looked at Cole, as if he had just discovered some new quality in him.

"And you—you caught him?" asked Miss Brown. "Where—how?"

Cole explained, but only very briefly. There was a gleam of sly humor in his eye. Toward the end of his recital he did a strange thing. He finished it off with an embellishing touch that was not in strict accordance with the truth.

"The best part of it all," he said in casual tones, "is that I have the fellow's confession in black

and white. Like most of his kind he showed the yellow streak when he saw the game was up. Just how complete the confession is I can't say, but it contains several interesting facts."

"Where is it?" said Carlin excitedly. "Have you got it with you?" He half rose from his chair, then sat down again.

"No; it isn't wise to carry such things on one's person. No telling when you're going to get knocked down and have your pockets picked. The confession is in a safe place. In due time I shall show it to you."

Carlin seemed inclined to ask questions, but Cole's face showed plainly that he had said all that he intended to say for the present. The lawyer got up, walked around the desk and gave the other's shoulder a vigorous slap. "You belong here with us," he declared with blunt emphasis. "You're just the man for the job. I was sure of it before; now I'm doubly certain. You've proven your fitness in forty different ways. Will you accept?"

Cole's eyes gleamed wistfully. His smile showed that the proposition appealed to him. "You aren't offering me the position just because I wormed a confession out of the hunchback?" he asked guardedly.

"By no means. We were ready to offer you the place a week ago, while you were sniffing around the edges of what you called the Carmody case. We need you, Cole. Think it over carefully. Consider the opportunities."

"I have considered them. I am strongly tempted to accept, especially since I am out of a job."

Cole gave a whimsical little laugh. "I forgot to tell you that Englebreth gave me my walking papers this morning. Do you care to take on a man who was fired by his last employer?"

"You just bet we do!" Carlin extended his hand, and Cole gripped it vigorously. "This evening your appointment will be confirmed by the full board, and afterward we'll introduce you to the members of the staff. There's one matter that's got to be settled immediately though. You've got a ticklish problem to solve right at the start, Cole. Something must be done about the body of Reeves."

Cole had already thought of that. He realized what a delicate position The Unknown Seven were in. The murder could not be reported to the police without jeopardizing the secrecy that, to a great extent, had been responsible for the organization's success. Neither would it be easy to turn the body over to the proper authorities without imperiling the society's seclusion. It was a knotty problem, and Cole considered it from all angles, while Carlin and Miss Brown showed him over the premises.

Cole's eyes grew wider and wider as he was conducted from room to room. On one side of the hall were the offices with their steel filing cases, huge nickel-plated safes, desks, typewriters, and even a rogues' gallery, which Cole inspected with avid interest. One room was devoted to finger prints and the Bertillon system of identification. Adjoining it was a laboratory in which, as Carlin explained, the latest scientific discoveries were adapted to the requirements of the detective profession.

They crossed the hall, and it seemed to Cole that

he was entering a different world. This part of the establishment was given over to clubrooms, but they were more magnificent than any Cole had ever seen. There was a well-appointed gymnasium; a swimming pool in which clear water gleamed invitingly in a huge tank of marble; a library containing all the latest fiction and belles-lettres; a dining room, an art gallery, a pool and billiard parlor, and various cozy little nooks for the members.

"You see, Mr. Cole, we believe in combining pleasure and comfort with work," explained Carlin, when the tour of inspection was finished and they were back in the office from which they had started. "By the way, dinner will be served at six-thirty. You must stay and dine with us."

Cole agreed after a moment's hesitation. His glance fell on the telephone at Carlin's desk, and suddenly he seemed to remember something.

"Perhaps you would like to use the telephone," the lawyer suggested. "The switchboard is in an office on the tenth floor, and all incoming and outgoing calls are relayed through it. No chance of a call being traced, you see."

Cole picked up the telephone and gave the operator the number of his landlady. Carlin and Miss Brown started to withdraw, but Cole assured them there was nothing personal about the call and asked them to stay.

"That you, Mrs. Armstrong?" he asked when he had got his connection. "Mr. Cole speaking. I may not be home till late this evening, and I wonder if you'd mind running up and giving Toots her milk. Yes, Toots—T-o-o-t-s. The cat, you

know. Very good of you. Will you do it right away, Mrs. Armstrong? I'll hold the wire till you come back. Toots wasn't looking well this morning. Acted as if she had a headache or something. I'm anxious to know how she is."

With the receiver at his ear, Cole waited. Carlin stroked his chin reflectively. From time to time he gazed in an odd way at the man who was to direct the activities of The Unknown Seven, and whose sole concern just now appeared to be an ailing cat. Miss Brown was amused and took no pains to conceal it.

Cole was kept waiting a long time. At last he pricked up his ears in a startled way, as if some surprising news was being told him. He uttered a few short exclamations, then hung up the receiver and glanced at his watch.

"Mr. Carlin," he said gravely, in a tone so low that the other two could scarcely hear, "two hours ago I sat in this chair and told you a lie." He made a silencing signal with his hand as Miss Brown and Carlin started to interrupt. "Yes, a lie. What I said about having wrung a confession from the hunchback wasn't true, though all the rest was in strict accordance with the facts. As you may remember, I mentioned having put the confession in a safe place. From that you might have inferred that I had hidden it at my home, or placed it in a safe-deposit box."

He was speaking in whispers, as if afraid that an eavesdropper might be lurking somewhere in the room. The faces of his two listeners showed stark bewilderment.

"That was two hours ago," he went on, "and just now my landlady told me that when she went up to my rooms to feed the cat she found everything thrown topsy-turvy. The place looked as if a cyclone had struck it."

Miss Brown gave a little gasp. Carlin's pupils contracted in astonishment. He stared hard at Cole, while a cloud overspread his face. One arm was stretched out on the desk, and his fingers clenched and unclenched spasmodically.

"They didn't lose any time," he muttered. "I don't understand, but you were right, Cole. There's a traitor among us."

CHAPTER XV

THE TRAITOR UNMASKED

WITH his fingers across his lips, Cole enjoined silence. His glance darted quickly over the floor, the ceiling and the walls. He moved hither and thither, looking behind desks and filing cases. Finally he stepped behind Carlin's desk and gazed speculatively at a panel of grille work in the wall. He held his hand before it and felt a strong draft of fresh air. It was obviously a ventilating shaft, and the force of the current suggested that air was driven into it by fans.

He whirled round and whispered to Carlin and the girl. "Talk," he said, "talk on any subject but the one you're thinking on. Be as natural as you can."

Carlin showed plainly that he did not understand, but he nodded obediently. Cole tiptoed to a typewriter desk in the rear, and in one of the drawers he found a box containing a number of small tools. Selecting a screw driver, he went back to the air shaft and loosened several of the screws that held the grilled panel. In a few moments he could bend it outward, and now he inserted his hand and ran it up and down the sides of the shaft.

"Any more of that sauterne left?" he heard Carlin ask the girl.

"About a dozen bottles, I think."

"We'll instruct the chef to have it served after the fish course. Just to celebrate the occasion, you know. Afterward——"

The lawyer ran on with the dogged air of a soldier obeying orders that he doesn't understand; but Cole heard no more. A sudden tensing of his body hinted that he had verified a suspicion. He had found a small metal disk attached to the opposite side of the air shaft, and to it was affixed a wire that extended upward. A serio-comic smile twisted his lips as he rejoined Carlin and Miss Brown. "Guess what I found," he said in a whisper.

The other two stared.

"An amplifying disk and a wire that seems to run out on the roof. A dictaphone in other words. There may be others scattered throughout the place. My little ruse has shown that these walls have ears."

The lawyer was too astounded for words. Miss Brown looked fixedly at Cole, her lips trembling a little at the corners.

"Did I hear you say something about sauterne?" asked Cole in his usual speaking voice, at the same time motioning them to step farther away from the shaft in which the disk was hidden. "Favorite drink of mine, though I take only an occasional drop of such things." Again he lowered his voice. "Tonight I shall get out on the roof and see where the wire runs to. Carlin, this is additional proof that there is a renegade in our midst. The man who posted the hunchback on how to get in here probably installed the dictaphone. It isn't safe for us to make a single move until we have singled

him out and rendered him harmless. We must attend to that even before we consider what is to be done with the body of Reeves."

Carlin still seemed a trifle dazed. "You are right, of course," he said. "We must get rid of the blackguard at once. It is startling to think that any one in our organization may be the traitor. How are we going to find him?"

"Leave that to me." Cole's narrowing gaze slanted upward, as if his thoughts were on the track of an idea. "I have noticed that a man of that kind nearly always has a flaw in him of some sort. Generally that flaw is cowardice. That gives us an advantage over him, right at the start. We'll play on his cowardice and make him betray himself."

The lawyer looked somewhat dubious. "How?" he asked.

"I haven't studied out the details yet," said Cole, but the slow twinkle in his eye told that the idea was assuming shape. "You sowed the seed of a plan in my mind when you mentioned sauterne. But don't expect anything spectacular. Sometimes simple measures work best. Can you arrange to have the whole organization here for dinner?"

The lawyer fingered his chin in a bewildered way. "It could be managed. Most of them have planned to attend, anyway."

"Splendid! Now, Carlin, since I am to take charge of the work here, it would seem only fitting that everybody should drink my health in sauterne, wouldn't it?"

"Cer—certainly," stammered Carlin.

"You could propose the toast yourself. I know you will do it charmingly. And I want you to see to it that everybody is invited to drink, including the waiters and the kitchen help. You could explain that the toast is to be a sort of pledge of allegiance."

The lawyer looked blinkingly at Cole, searching his face in vain for a sign that he was jesting.

"I'm not sure there is enough sauterne to go around, observed Miss Brown, who evidently shared Carlin's stupefaction.

"Then use smaller glasses," suggested Cole. "Besides, in an emergency the wine can be thinned out. I think you said there were a dozen bottles. That ought to be enough for one round. I can almost taste that sauterne already." He smacked his lips as he consulted his watch. "Carlin, I wonder if you would mind telephoning my landlady, Gramercy 0099, to see if any messages have been received for me. The bright youngster who is watching Doctor Latham's house may have been trying to reach me. In the meantime, Miss Brown, I am going to ask you to come with me to the dining room. I want to get a general idea of the seating arrangement."

With a long, wondering glance at Cole, the girl conducted him from the office, while Carlin cleared his husky throat in preparation for the task assigned him.

"You are a very deep person, Mr. Cole," the girl observed, as she led him into the dining room, where tables were set in horseshoe formation. "I

have a suspicion that you are keeping a perfectly gorgeous scheme all to yourself."

Cole smiled thinly, while his glance roved over snow-white napery and brightly polished silver. At times Miss Brown had a naïveté about her that he found rather alluring.

"I'll take you into the secret in a few moments," he promised. "One confidence deserves another, however. How much longer must I go on calling you Miss Brown?"

"Don't you like the name?"

"I do not. I suspect you invented it on the spur of the moment the other night. It served well enough for a temporary acquaintanceship, but now its usefulness is past."

"True," she admitted. "It was an awkward alias, anyhow. How do you like Merle Brownell?"

"Much better. One syllable more or less makes a lot of difference at times. I take it you are the high priestess of The Unknown Seven?"

"Oh, no! I'm only an odd-job expert. My father, who died three years ago, was the founder of the organization. I have hung around, more or less, ever since. Most of the time I suspect I am in the way, but occasionally I manage to make myself useful."

Cole regarded her with a look that seemed to say, "You'll pass."

"You promised to take me into your secret," she reminded him. "Aren't you afraid? How do you know that I'm not the traitor, or traitoress?"

"I know," said Cole firmly, "but don't ask me how I know. By the way, Miss Brownell," and

Cole lowered his voice several octaves, "I see the wineglasses haven't been placed yet. Don't you think you had better speak to the chef about the sauterne?"

She gave him a puzzled look, then a roguish smile illuminated her face. "I'm beginning to think the sauterne is the chief ingredient in that brilliant idea of yours," she declared, as she left the room. A few moments later Cole followed, turning toward the laboratory which Carlin had so proudly shown him. At one wall were several shelves on which bottles were placed in long rows. After studying the labels, Cole selected one of the bottles and put it in his pocket.

Miss Brownell was supervising the placing of the wineglasses when he returned to the dining room. He stood aside and watched silently until the task was finished and the waiter had left the room. Then he took the bottle from his pocket and stepped to the table.

"Please guard the door," he told Miss Brownell, speaking in very low tones. "If any one wants to enter, keep him out on any pretext you like."

She watched him in astonishment while he went to work. The bottle contained a colorless liquid, and with great care he poured a few drops into each wineglass.

"Are you going to poison us?" she asked. There was a secretive air about Cole that seemed to prohibit talking aloud.

"No, the stuff's harmless. Nothing but spirits of hartshorn. It will mix with the wine, but only a person with a very sensitive tongue will notice

the queer taste. Such a person, if there should be one among us this evening, will notice that the wine has an odd flavor, but that's all. He won't be able to identify the added ingredient. The quantity is too slight."

"That makes everything very clear of course," remarked Miss Brownell. "About as clear as mud."

Cole went calmly on with his work. "I suppose it has often occurred to you, Miss Brownell, that the imagination is a great aid to one's senses. Tell a person there's a fire in the next room, and he will instantly smell smoke, even though he may not have noticed it before."

"I don't see what that has to do with what you are doing."

"A very great deal. When these glasses have been filled with wine, a person, taking a casual sip of the concoction, will not notice the queer taste. If he is told, after the second or third sip, that he has drunk poisoned wine, the peculiar taste will become noticeable at once. Without stopping to try to identify the queer flavor, he will instantly become convinced that he has been poisoned, especially if the circumstances are such that he already has reason to fear that some such thing is going to happen to him. That's what imagination does to a person."

"Is this some kind of psychological experiment?"

"In a way." Cole had reached the last glass and was now putting the bottle in his pocket. "Incidentally it is interesting to note that a person with an uneasy conscience always has a lively imagination. Not only can he spot real dangers a

mile off, but his guilty conscience is constantly surrounding him with imaginary ones. It's a lucky thing, too. If it wasn't for such frailties in the human make-up, we detectives would lose our reputation for achieving brilliant deductions."

Miss Brownell smiled soberly as they walked out. "I think we are going to have a most interesting dinner," she murmured. "I hope your psychological experiment will succeed, Mr. Cole. I must run off now and powder my nose."

Cole slipped back to the laboratory and replaced the bottle. A few moments later he met Carlin in the corridor. The lawyer told him that he had called up Cole's landlady, but no messages had been received for him.

"That means Doctor Latham has made no move yet," said Cole thoughtfully. "He plays a slow and sure hand."

The lawyer nodded. "Your landlady seemed quite distracted over the robbery," he announced.

"She isn't the only one. I bet Toots is the most distracted female in the world, just now." Cole gazed gloomily into space, and then a tall, broad-shouldered man approached with an easy swagger. Cole's lips twisted into a reminiscent smile, as he recognized the surgeon.

"Hello, Ballinger," said the lawyer. "Shake hands with Kingdon Cole if you dare. I wouldn't blame him if he were to shoot you on sight, but he has a forgiving disposition. Cole has just agreed to become one of us."

"Splendid!" ejaculated the doctor, and the two men shook hands. As their fingers touched,

Cole experienced that indescribable something that comes from contact with a man of strong personal magnetism. Ballinger's grip could not have been called energetic, but it transmitted a subtle electric current.

"You are tackling a man-size job," remarked the doctor after Carlin had withdrawn. "You will have a chance to match your wits against the infernal cleverness of the astutest rogue in the country. I suppose Carlin has explained the situation to you?"

"He has only given me a few hints. There hasn't been time for detailed explanations. All I know is that a colossal project of some sort is on foot, and that The Unknown Seven is trying to put a crimp in it."

Ballinger took his arm and led him to the smoking room. He extended his cigar case, and Cole noticed that his fingers were long, slim, and finely tapering, the fingers of one having a deft touch, a strong imagination, and a lively dramatic instinct. Again Cole saw that Ballinger's resemblance to Doctor Latham was very slight, extending only to outward physique. It was the disguise, and the black beard in particular that had produced the likeness.

"Too bad about poor Reeves," murmured Ballinger, as he held a lighted match in his cupped hands. "His life, however, would have been only a burden to himself and others, so in one sense it is just as well that he was shuffled off. For professional reasons I regret his death very keenly. I had hopes of being able to restore his brain to

some degree of normal functioning. If I had succeeded I think he would have told us a most interesting story, and that, of course, was just what the other side feared. However, his actions told us a great deal the other night."

"When he seemed to recognize Doctor Latham in you?"

"Exactly. To that extent the experiment was a complete success. It was Carlin's idea, and the credit belongs to him. I merely carried out his suggestions, and I didn't particularly relish the task." He chuckled apologetically. "Well, the murder of Reeves is additional proof of the fact that we are fighting a crowd of very ingenious and utterly conscienceless scoundrels. Evidently they are directed by a master mind, a genius of the kind we often read about, but seldom meet. You will admit there's a great deal of fascination about a rascal of that type, Cole?"

Cole did not answer, but he remembered the magnetic tug he had felt in Doctor Latham's presence.

"I almost envy you the exciting times you will have tracking this master mind to his lair," Ballinger went on. "We know some of the smaller fry in the crowd, Professor Carmody, for instance, but our efforts won't lead anywhere until we have found the directing genius. And when we have found him, Cole, we will be face to face with an interesting character. Brilliant, resourceful, unscrupulous, and full of bewildering subtleties, the kind that kills without hesitation the moment his plans are interfered with. I dare say you have already suspected who he is?"

Ballinger's eyes shone with a fine glow of enthusiasm, but it was the unimpassioned enthusiasm of a scientist who dissects and analyzes.

"Perhaps," said Cole guardedly. "Haven't you?"

Ballinger smiled queerly, but the opening of the door and the announcement that dinner was served forestalled a reply. In the corridor they were parted by a stream of people, and Cole found an opportunity to speak a few words in Carlin's ear. The lawyer nodded bewilderedly, like one receiving instructions which he does not understand. He knew Cole had a plan of some sort, but he could not make even a guess as to what it was.

There were some twenty-five or thirty at the table. Cole found himself seated between Miss Brownell and Carlin. Inwardly he felt a tingling sensation, as he contemplated the bombshell he was about to explode among the diners, but his face showed no sign of it. Now and then he stole a glance down the two wings of the table. He liked the faces of the men with whom he was to work. They were an alert, keen-eyed lot, the kind of men Cole himself would have selected.

"You are a judge of faces," whispered Miss Brownell, leaning slightly toward him. "Who is the traitor?"

Cole shook his head. That very question had already occurred to him. There was not one in the gathering who by his looks could be singled out as the traitor.

"Whom would you pick?" he whispered back.

Her glance ran quickly up and down the table. He could see that her woman's intuition was at

work. A queer gleam came into her eyes; her face hardened for a moment. He tried to trace her glance, but it was too late.

"It wouldn't be fair to tell, would it?" she said evasively. "I may be wrong, you know."

Cole only smiled. As nearly as he had been able to tell, her glance had rested for an instant somewhere near the center of the left wing of the table. He scanned the faces of the men seated there, but none of them impressed him unfavorably, and he wondered what Miss Brownell could have based her guess on.

The dinner progressed by easy stages, and the scene which Cole had been rehearsing in his mind was drawing near. Carlin, seated at his right, looked nervous, and Miss Brownell's usually vivacious manner seemed somewhat dampened. Finally the sauterne was opened and the waiters filled the glasses. Carlin cleared his throat.

Noisy applause greeted the lawyer's announcement that Cole had accepted the management of The Unknown Seven's activities. Then Carlin proposed a toast, and it was drunk standing. Cole watched the faces of the men as they quaffed their wine. In several of them he saw a vaguely wondering look, telling him that their senses had registered an impression so faint that as yet their minds had not grasped it. He sipped his own wine, and he wondered whether he would have been able to taste the foreign substance if he had not known it was there.

When Carlin finished, Cole got to his feet amid renewed handclapping. Somewhat bluntly

he thanked them for the ovation, and then he veered sharply to the subject uppermost in his mind.

"I wonder," he said, "how many of you can look me straight in the eye and tell me that you are loyal to this organization."

A breathless hush followed. His very quiet tones had created a profound impression. In the next instant every pair of eyes in the room was leveled at him without wavering.

"It seems to be unanimous," he observed dryly. "One can lie, however, with his eyes as well as with his tongue, and I know that one among you is a liar."

Another period of silence followed, and then came a scraping of feet and exclamations of incredulity. Cole held up a silencing hand. His eyes were everywhere, noting each shifting expression in the startled faces before him.

"One of you has proven false to the organization," he declared in short-clipped accents. "I discovered it only a little while ago. I found positive proof, not only of the treachery, but of the traitor's identity as well. He is at this table. He was one of those who only a few moments ago looked me straight in the eyes. What shall we do with him?"

Once more came an electric hush. Cole had spoken quietly, but with an emphasis that carried conviction. He smiled faintly, as he met the startled glances of the diners. A slight trace of the foreign substance in the wine was still lingering on his tongue.

"What shall we do with him?" he asked again.

"There's only one thing to do with a traitor,"

muttered some one at the farther end of the table, and the suggestion was followed by a chorus of approval.

"And that thing has already been done," declared Cole with grim emphasis. "So that it may serve as a warning to others who may be tempted to betray us, the traitor will die right before our eyes. Inside one minute the poison that was put into his glass will begin to take effect."

Cole pretended to look at his watch, but his glance was gliding swiftly over the two long rows of faces. He had spoken rapidly, and yet with a quiet insistence, putting his astounding announcement into the fewest possible words. The effect he hoped to produce depended upon a quick assault on the guilty person's mental faculties, shocking him off his balance before he had time to digest the statement. In the acute tension of the moment, the vague impression that he had received while sipping his wine would suddenly crystallize, and then, with the fear of death upon him, he could not help betraying himself.

At least such was the psychological effect Cole had intended, and he had been reasonably sure that the test would succeed. Moments passed while he stood, watch in hand, glancing out of the tail of an eye at the faces around the table. Sixty seconds passed, and a look of diffidence crossed his features. Here and there an impatient mutter was heard. Carlin was looking up at him with an expression of thinly veiled disappointment. At length Cole snapped the watch shut. He smiled rather sheepishly.

"The trick didn't work," he said disgustedly. "Yes, I might as well admit it was only a trick. The traitor was too clever to betray himself." With that he sat down, well aware that he had made an unfavorable impression.

"It was too thin, Cole," whispered Carlin in his ear. "Too bad you didn't consult me beforehand."

Cole nodded dejectedly. Then he felt Miss Brownell's gaze on his face. He turned and saw a knowing twinkle in her eyes.

"It was very clever, Mr. Cole," she whispered. But for all that her face indicated she might have given him only a consoling platitude. "You saw, of course?"

"Yes, I saw enough." The sheepish grin still lingered on Cole's lips. "And you guessed right. The traitor is sitting near the center of the left wing of the table. Doctor Ballinger is a very astute rascal. It took him only a fraction of a second to see through my little bluff. He is smiling behind his palm this very moment. We'll just let him keep on smiling for a while, eh, Miss Brownell?"

CHAPTER XVI

GOLD

AFTER dinner Cole looked the picture of a man whose faith in himself has received a staggering blow. He seemed to take the outcome of his ruse very much to heart. He moved gloomily among the members of the organization, getting personally acquainted with a number of the men on his staff, and all the while he appeared to be making valiant, but not very successful, efforts to shake off his depression. Carlin did his best to gloss over the apparent frustration of the scheme, but Cole proved a hard man to console.

Doctor Ballinger approached him after he had retired into a corner, and gave him a vigorous slap on the shoulder. "Don't take it so hard, old man," he said cheerily. "Know just exactly how you feel. It's embarrassing to turn up a flivver right at the start, but don't you mind. Better luck next time. Have a smoke."

"Thanks," said Cole dejectedly, as he helped himself to a cigar from the doctor's case. "What hurts me most is that I know I was right. Nothing is so humiliating to a man as to be sure of his facts and not be able to prove them. I know positively that there's a black sheep in this fold. If I had worked the scheme properly——"

"Tut, tut!" interrupted Ballinger. "Your scheme was all right in principle. You were simply out

of luck, that's all. The traitor, if you're right in the assumption that there is such a creature among us, is probably a very slick customer. No doubt you had him scared stiff for a moment, but his emotional reaction didn't last long enough for him to betray himself. He assumed that you were only bluffing. At any rate he saw that, having already drained his glass, nothing could be gained by making a show of himself. In other words his mind outstripped his emotions, and that's where your psychology fell down. No matter! You'll get him next time."

Cole walked away, a faint twitching at the corners of his lips. In the main Doctor Ballinger's analysis had been correct. He had only forgotten to mention one little detail. Just as the traitor's mind had outstripped his emotions, so had Cole's alert glance outstripped both. For just an instant Ballinger had shown all the symptoms of acute terror. He had shaken them off with superb self-control, but not before Cole's eye had registered his momentary confusion.

The revelation that Ballinger was the traitor had given Cole a shock at first. The doctor was one of the last men in the organization whom he would have suspected of treachery. Having found him out, Cole saw no reason for apprising the doctor of the fact. He preferred to let Ballinger lull himself into a false security until he should show his hand more plainly. Neither did it seem advisable to Cole to take the other members into his confidence in regard to his discovery. It would be hard to keep a secret among so many, and the more hot-

headed ones among them would probably demand drastic action.

As inconspicuously as he could, Cole left the others and withdrew to the room that had been pointed out to him as his private office. It was small and comfortable and devoid of the drabness that characterizes the workroom of the average executive. There was a vase containing red roses on the desk, and he noticed that the pictures on the wall had been carefully chosen. He stretched himself out in the swivel chair and rocked in an experimental way. His glance fell on three white buttons affixed to the side of the desk. He pushed the one nearest him, just to see what would happen.

The door opened, and in strode the biggest negro Cole has ever seen.

"Who are you?" he inquired.

"Sambo, sah."

"And what's your job, Sambo?"

"Just now mah bussiness is to answer dese heay bells, sah. Dat ain't mah reg'lar job, though, but Rufus is done laid up in the hosspittle, and I'se takin' his place."

"What happened to Rufus? Sick?"

"Yas, sah. Mighty sick, sah." Sambo grinned expansively. "You ought to know, boss, 'cause you made him sick yusself. Dat was an a'ful wallop you handed Rufus, sah."

Cole smiled reminiscently, as he recalled one of the numerous experiences that had enlivened his first visit to the establishment of The Unknown Seven.

"Too bad about Rufus," he remarked. "Now,

Sambo, I want you to find Mr. McKendrick and ask him to come here at once."

"Yas, sah." With a profound bow Sambo waddled out.

McKendrick, one of the young operatives with whom Cole had chatted since the dinner, appeared after a brief wait. He had a clear eye, a whimsical expression about the mouth that had appealed to Cole on first sight, and a firmly molded chin.

"Go into the main office," Cole directed. "You will find a dictaphone in the ventilator shaft. The wire apparently runs out on the roof. Trace it to the other end, then report to me."

"Very well, sir." As McKendrick walked out, Cole noticed with approval the easy swing to his shoulders. Once more he touched the nearest button, and Sambo appeared almost instantly.

"Find Sloane and tell him I want him," Cole directed.

Sloane entered in a few moments. With his keen intellectual features and shell-rimmed spectacles he looked a good deal like a college professor.

"Sloane," began Cole, "I want you to go to the block in which Doctor Latham resides. Somewhere in the neighborhood, in a basement entrance across the street, perhaps, you'll find a young chap of dilapidated appearance who answers to the name of Tony Pinto. He's been watching the doctor's house for the past twenty-four hours and must be sadly in need of food and sleep. Tell him I have sent you to relieve him."

"I understand perfectly, sir."

Cole gave him a few more instructions, and then

Sloane withdrew. Again Cole pressed the button, this time to summon a man whom he instructed to make a thorough search all over the establishment for hidden disks and wires. When the man had gone, Cole leaned back in his chair and pondered. He had set the machinery in motion, but the hardest task he had reserved for himself. Something had to be done very soon about the body of Reeves. What to do with it was a problem that would demand all his resourcefulness. Too, a watch must be kept over Doctor Ballinger, and Cole did not like to delegate that business to any one else. He expected to learn a great deal from the unsuspecting doctor's movements during the next twenty-four hours.

He was deep in thought when a knock sounded on the door. In response to his rather brusque "Come in," Miss Brownell entered.

"I've been thinking," she announced.

"So I see," said Cole, placing a chair for her. Miss Brownell, he observed, was one of the few women whom he had met who could wear a thoughtful frown becomingly. Where another woman's forehead would have wrinkled, hers merely rippled.

"You have been doing a lot of thinking yourself," she remarked, regarding him with that curious impersonal glance of hers.

"Yes, but mostly in the dark," Cole admitted. "I'm pretty much in the same fix as the man who walks into a theater in the middle of the second act. The only thing that's clear so far is that the principal actors in this drama seem to be doctors."

"You refer to Latham and Ballinger, of course. There is still another doctor involved."

"Still another? Who is he?"

"In a sense he is the real instigator of the plot, although he died one hundred and thirty-eight years ago."

Cole blinked bewilderedly. "Sounds rather ghostly."

"His name was James Price, an English physician of high repute, who discovered a method of transforming baser metals into gold. You can read up on him in history or the biographical encyclopedias, if you like. He wrote a book entitled 'An Account of Some Experiments,' but it has been out of print a long time and copies are hard to obtain. Professor Carmody owns one of the few still in existence."

"Oh!" said Cole, elevating his brows. "So that's what the mystery is about? But you don't mean to tell me that sane men like Latham and Ballinger are dabbling in the exploded myth of alchemy?"

"I do. And that myth, by the way, seems to die very hard, Mr. Cole. Its been exploded and reëxploded since the dawn of history, and yet it keeps bobbing up every now and then."

Cole gave a little impatient shrug. "It's rubbish," he declared. "I have managed to forget most of the things I learned at school, but I seem to recall that modern science has absolutely established the fact that one element cannot be transformed into another."

She looked at him amusedly. "We women always smile when you men speak of absolute facts. The

phrase is so delightfully characteristic of the sterner sex. And the world has moved since you went to school, Mr. Cole. Science has hedged and quibbled and reversed itself a good many times on the subject of the transformation of metals. It wasn't so very long ago that some one discovered that radium can be produced from helium, or was it the other way round? Anyway, right there is an instance of the transformation of one element into another."

Cole opened his lips to speak, but seemed unable to find the right words.

"I was telling you about James Price," Miss Brownell went on. "He claimed to have discovered a method whereby he could transform sixty parts of mercury into one part of gold. He was rather secretive about his discovery and hedged it about with a lot of mystic hocus-pocus. About all that is definitely known is that a mysterious red powder figured prominently in the process. The red powder was mixed with mercury and fluid borax, and the concoction was then put in a crucible and stirred with an iron rod. The result was gold."

"The iron rod must have been a magic scepter," suggested Cole dryly.

"Perhaps; anyway the Royal Society of England got interested in Price's experiments and made an investigation. A committee of England's foremost scientists went to his laboratory, firmly expecting to expose Price as a faker or lunatic. I can imagine the long, bewhiskered faces of those learned old fogies when they put the gold through an assaying

process and found that it proved genuine in every respect."

Cole's pupils dilated a trifle, but he looked still dubious.

"What I have told you is a matter of history, amply documented and supported by incontrovertible evidence," declared Miss Brownell. "There can be no doubt but that Price produced a form of gold that proved genuine on assay. I am now coming to the strangest part of the story. Having solved this problem, that has tantalized scientific minds since the beginning of history, Price turned a sort of mental somersault. Just what happened to him has never become definitely known. Some still insist that he was a faker, despite the tests that were made. Others believe that his mind collapsed under the strain, and that he went insane. That seems to be nature's way of punishing those who peep behind the curtain of the unknown, and Price was neither the first nor the last to go mad on the subject of gold. Still others think that gold became an obsession with him, a sort of monomania, and that he could not endure the thought of sharing his discovery with others. Then there are those who cling to the theory that his production of gold was nothing but an accident."

"What happened?" asked Cole.

"The committee of scientists wanted to learn Price's formula and asked him to repeat the experiment in their presence. Price refused on the pretext that his supply of red powders was exhausted. Shortly afterward he committed suicide by drinking laurel water. It has been generally

supposed that his secret died with him. His book is somewhat vague in regard to the composition of the red powders. Repeated attempts have been made to learn exactly what they consisted of, but without success. Last year, however, Professor Carmody returned from abroad after browsing in the libraries of the Old World for many months. He brought back with him a number of faded and forgotten manuscripts, said to be in Doctor Price's handwriting. Where he found them, and how he got possession of them we don't know, but we do know that they gave him a clew to the secret which Price guarded so jealously."

"How do you know?" demanded Cole.

"Our organization has eyes and ears everywhere. However, it was mostly through accident that we learned what was on foot. I shan't bore you with the details. Carmody saw a chance to become enormously rich by manufacturing gold on a large scale, using Doctor Price's formula. But he needed money to swing the enterprise, and so he guardedly approached a number of wealthy men with a scheme for multiplying their fortunes many times. Besides he knew that he lacked the executive ability required to engineer a project of such magnitude. He talked to Malcolm Reeves so engagingly that Reeves was smitten with the gold fever and supplied a great portion of the cash that he needed. No doubt he enlisted the assistance of other rich men in a similar manner. The lure of gold is a terrible thing, Mr. Cole."

"A curse," said Cole. "But what about Latham?"

"Latham is an extremely clever and very versatile

man. Though he practices medicine he has dabbled in various sciences. Perhaps Carmody needed his assistance in solving some of the problems that he encountered in working out Price's formula. However that may be, we know he has been very close to Professor Carmody for several weeks."

"Then you think Carmody is the moving spirit in the enterprise?"

"No; Carmody merely supplied the formula and his scientific knowledge. He is a small man, physically and mentally, with a sharp, but narrow, intellect, and he is deficient in the qualities required to direct an enterprise of this sort. Knowing his shortcomings, he was willing to put the management of the project into stronger hands than his own."

"Latham's, for instance?" asked Cole.

"Or Ballinger's. Both are very shrewd and energetic men, though I hadn't thought of Ballinger in that connection until to-night. It is your job to find the master mind that is directing the operations of this gold-mad crowd, Mr. Cole. We know that they are already producing gold, or a substitute for gold, on a very large scale."

"Where?" inquired Cole quickly.

"That's another thing for you to find out. In some secluded spot in New York City or its environs there is a large and fully equipped plant. From snatches of conversation which we have overheard we know that it exists, but we haven't been able to locate it. We also know that the conspirators feel confident that their product will stand every test, that it resembles natural gold in every respect. In order to eliminate all risk, however, they have

decided to hold the gold in storage until the desired quantity has been manufactured. You can imagine what will happen when a golden flood is suddenly released and poured out over the country."

"A few men will become enormously rich over night, and the monetary system will be utterly disorganized. I suppose the ultimate result will be the worst panic the world has ever seen."

"That's exactly what Mr. Carlin and the others think," declared Miss Brownell.

They sat silent for a time, neither looking at the other. Their minds were stunned by the contemplation of the golden havoc which their imagination pictured. Cole recalled the look of insane ecstasy which he had seen in Malcolm Reeves' face. The words, "Pretty yellow," which the insane man mumbled, suddenly assumed a vivid significance. He shook himself a little.

"I suppose Reeves had a falling out with the others," he remarked. "That's why they first destroyed his mind and afterward killed him."

"Presumably." Her eyes looked a little dim, as if they had gazed too long upon a dazzling vision. "It was about Reeves I was thinking just before I walked in here and disturbed you. I was wondering why Ballinger didn't commit the murder. He had free access to the place and nobody had any suspicions against him. Why was it necessary to have the hunchback sneak in here and do it?"

"I think the answer to that question is fairly clear." Cole's smile seemed to say that women, even the cleverest of them, were rather simple-minded at times. "The job had to be done by an outsider

in order to conceal the fact that the conspirators had an associate in your midst."

"But they didn't conceal it. The ease with which the hunchback got in and out proved clearly that he was assisted by some one on the inside."

"That's so," admitted Cole, somewhat abashed. "Well, then it's quite likely that Ballinger balked at the job. Murder is pretty nasty business. It is a coarser crime than depriving a man of his reason. Many criminals of the intellectual type shrink from it."

"Maybe that was the way of it. There's another thing that has been troubling me lately. Who do you think performed the operation on Reeves?"

Cole stared at her for an instant. "It seems to be pretty well established that Doctor Latham was the man."

"Yes, I know that's what they all seem to think. Their reason is that Reeves seemed to recognize Ballinger when he was made up to resemble Latham."

"It was more than recognition. The sight of Ballinger made up as Latham fairly terrified the poor man. I'll never forget how he looked."

"But isn't that a flimsy reason for supposing that Latham performed the operation?"

Cole leaned out of his chair and regarded her closely, as if wondering whether her intuition was once more at work. "Can you imagine any other explanation for the way Reeves acted that night?"

"Yes; can't you?"

Cole shook his head ponderously.

"Just think about it," she said, smiling faintly; then she rose and walked out of the room.

For a long time Cole sat very still, with a thoughtful pucker across his forehead. Once, from force of habit, he reached for his pipe, frowning when he realized it wasn't there. Now and then he bent a quizzical gaze on the chair which Miss Brownell had vacated.

"What the deuce did she mean?" he mumbled. "What else is there to——"

With a jerky motion he sat erect in his chair. He gave the desk in front of him a vigorous thump.

"By Jove, she wins!" he declared. "There is another explanation. It's beginning to look as though——" He checked himself, scowling. "But that only muddles the situation. What's the good of an explanation that doesn't explain. But I suppose a woman can't see it that way. They're all alike, from Toots down."

He shrugged as if to banish unprofitable speculations. He suddenly remembered that there had been weighty things on his mind when Miss Brownell interrupted his thoughts. He had given several orders to the men, and he had been studying what to do with the body of Reeves, and how he might make the most of his discovery that Doctor Ballinger was the traitor. He jumped from the chair as the physician's name ran through his mind. For half an hour or more he had given not a single thought to Ballinger. He hurried from the office and crossed the corridor, but a glance into the smoking room reassured him. Ballinger was sprawled out leisurely in an armchair, evidently in

the midst of an anecdote which he seemed to be relating with great gusto to his companion.

Cole went farther down the corridor and rapped on the door to Miss Brownell's private room. "Wish you would keep an eye on Ballinger for a while," he whispered when she opened. She lifted her brows in a knowing way and nodded. In the main office he found Carlin bent over a stack of papers. The man seemed a veritable dynamo of energy.

"I've been thinking about Reeves," he said.

Carlin looked up and took an obese cigar from his mouth. "What do you suggest?"

"That we obey the spirit of the law and blink the letter. The ends of justice will be met if the murderer is convicted and punished. It won't be necessary to drag all the embarrassing details into light."

"How can it be avoided?"

"I have a plan, but, before I go any farther, I would like to see the body."

The lawyer got up. "I would have shown it to you when I took you over the place, but Miss Brownell was with us then, and you know how women are about such things."

He led the way from the room, and they went to the end of the corridor. There Carlin opened a door, and they stepped in. It was dark, and Cole could see nothing. He heard a slight scraping sound, as the lawyer ran his hand over the wall in search of a switch. Then a light flashed on. Carlin raised an arm and pointed.

"There," he said a trifle thickly, indicating a

shape spread out on a cot at the farther side of the room.

Cole walked up to the cot and looked down at the dead man. He jerked back a little as his glance fell on the lifeless face. Then he bent over the body and gazed fixedly into the rigid features. Finally he stood up and turned to Carlin, who had remained behind.

"When did you last see the body?" he inquired, and his voice sounded a trifle husky.

"Why, I think it was this morning. Yes, that was it, about ten o'clock this morning. Why do you ask?"

"Because—— But see for yourself."

With a wondering glance at the detective, Carlin crossed the floor. He looked down at the motionless figure, and suddenly he shrank back a step. A husky exclamation sounded in his throat, then he slowly raised his eyes, and for a long moment the two men stared blankly at each other.

"It—it isn't Reeves!" stammered the lawyer.

"No—it isn't Reeves!" echoed Cole.

CHAPTER XVII

IN ROOM 2512

COLE had recognized the dead man at a glance. It was McKendrick, the young operative whom he had instructed to trace down the dictaphone wire. That had been only an hour ago, and already death had blotted out the whimsical expression about the mouth that had attracted Cole to him from the first.

"Shot through the head," muttered Cole, noticing a crimson stain just above the left temple. "He hasn't been dead more than fifteen or twenty minutes."

He turned and looked out through the crack of the open door. A laugh sounded in the direction of the smoking room. Perhaps Doctor Ballinger had just told another funny story. Cole closed the door.

"This shows there are no limits to the rascality of those blackguards," said the lawyer. "But I don't see why they should kill McKendrick."

Cole explained the errand on which he had dispatched the young detective. "No doubt McKendrick made an important discovery of some kind," he added. "That's probably why he was killed. He must have been overpowered, either while getting his facts or on his way back here to report. Probably the latter; that would explain why the body was taken here. The murderer wanted to conceal his crime as long as possible, and for a

temporary hiding place this room served as well as any other. We must find out whether Ballinger has been absent from the smoking room during the last hour or so."

The lawyer seemed dazed. "But the other body? What happened to it?"

"You are sure it was here this morning?"

"Positive."

"Could any one have taken it down the private elevator without being seen?"

"Impossible. Even if such a thing could be done, which is unthinkable, it is a ticklish job to transport a body through the streets. It is not yet midnight."

"Is there any other exit?"

"Only the stairs leading to the roof."

"Then it is a safe bet that the body of Reeves was taken out that way. From the roof it could have been slipped down a fire escape in the rear, and from there—Heaven only knows!"

"But why should such a thing be done? What object could any one have in doing it?"

"I don't know, Carlin. I can only make a hazy guess. Being a lawyer you know better than I do that, with the body missing, it will be hard to prove the murder of Reeves. I believe the law covering murder cases provides that, when the *corpus delicti* cannot be proven, the commission of the crime must be established by direct, not circumstantial, evidence. Isn't that correct?"

"Substantially, yes."

"And, as I understand it, nobody saw the crime committed. Consequently there can be no direct

testimony in regard to the murder. It appears that the men we are fighting are playing a very shrewd game."

The lawyer tried to pull himself together. "But isn't it your idea that the men who instigated the murder of Reeves are also responsible for McKendrick's death?"

"Presumably?"

"Then why, after going to all that trouble to cover up the first crime, did they leave the evidence of the second murder in plain sight?"

"Looks a bit contradictory, doesn't it?" Cole squinted abstractedly at the form on the cot. It seemed as though the murderers of McKendrick, in placing the body in the identical spot where that of Reeves had lain, had gone out of their way to add a spectacular touch to their crime. "But you may be sure of one thing," he added. "They had good reasons for doing what they did. There isn't any doubt——"

He stopped short, and Carlin gave him a puzzled look.

"Yes, that must be it," Cole went on in an undertone. "The reason for what they did is to be found in the one thing that differentiates the murder of Reeves from that of McKendrick."

"And what's that?"

"Reeves was operated upon before he was murdered; McKendrick was not."

Carlin seemed unable to follow this line of reasoning.

"If there should be an autopsy," Cole explained, "it might be discovered that an atrocious operation

had been performed on Reeves before his death. Such an operation could have been performed only by a skilled surgeon. It would be deducted that the operation and the murder were perpetrated by the same parties. That would reduce the range of suspicion down to one class of individuals, surgeons. So, you see, the body of Reeves constituted a clew to the identity of his murderers."

Carlin gave him an admiring glance. "First rate!" he applauded. "I'm glad you are doing the heavy thinking for us."

"You would have seen it yourself if you hadn't been upset to-night," said Cole modestly. "By the way, it's just as well not to let the news of this fresh outrage get out among the men at present. Wish you would show me the stairs to the roof."

They left the room, and the lawyer locked the door. A short distance down the corridor they met Miss Brownell, and Cole recalled that he had asked her to keep an eye on the physician. Her lips tightened as he briefly whispered what had happened.

"Do you know whether Ballinger was absent from the smoking room for any length of time during the last hour and a half?" he added.

"He went out for cigars," said Miss Brownell. "He explained that his case was empty, and he smokes only his special brand. When he returned he accounted for his long absence by saying that most of the cigar stores in the neighborhood were closed."

"That explanation is worthy of the doctor," said Cole. "It's plausible and yet simple. A more in-

volved one might have got him into difficulties, if he should have been checked up on it afterward. Please watch him, Miss Brownell. If by any chance he should leave, have one of the men follow him. Now, Carlin."

The lawyer and Cole stepped into the main office. Suddenly Cole seemed to recall something. He went to the ventilator shaft which contained the dictaphone that had cost McKendrick his life. He touched the disk, and a low mutter escaped him as he found that the wire had been cut. About a foot and a half of it was dangling from the disk. He turned and told Carlin what he had discovered.

"Something made them suspicious," he added. "They cut the wire so we wouldn't be able to trace it."

"They did that after murdering McKendrick," suggested the lawyer.

"Without a doubt. McKendrick, if he were alive, could probably tell us where the wire terminated. Now we will have a look at the roof."

But the door opened just then, and the man who entered was the operative whom Cole had instructed to search the establishment for hidden dictaphones. He reported that he had found four in as many different rooms, but in each instance the wires had been cut. Cole thanked him and dismissed him.

"It's a safe bet that all those wires were cut within the last hour or so," he told the lawyer.

Carlin led him to the farther end of the office. There he opened a door and indicated a steep flight of stairs. He was about to proceed up the stairs, but Cole held him back.

"Wait, Carlin." Cole took an electric flash light from his pocket and turned the gleam on the steps. They looked as if they had not been swept in a long while. He stooped low to examine a number of marks in the thick layer of dust. Drawing a magnifying lens from his pocket and slowly moving the electric torch up and down, he made a careful inspection of the lower steps.

"Two sets of footprints," he declared. "One set is fairly large and broad-toed, a number nine and a half shoe, I should say. The other is a size and a half smaller, also narrower. This tends to show that McKendrick was followed when he came down from the roof."

"Why do you suppose he was permitted to leave the roof?" inquired the lawyer.

"Because the murderer couldn't aim in the dark. He wanted to make a sure job of it. Probably McKendrick didn't know he was followed down the stairs. Likely as not the shot wasn't fired until he got down to the main office. It's even possible the murder wasn't committed until he was out in the corridor. That would explain why the murderer chose the room at the end of the hall as a temporary hiding place for the body. If the shooting took place in the corridor, he had to drag or carry it only a few steps."

Cole pocketed his flash and lens, and they started up the stairs.

"But wouldn't the shot have been heard?" asked Carlin.

"Not if the weapon was equipped with a silencer.

The smell of the burned powder was probably sucked up very quickly by the automatic ventilators."

Carlin opened a trapdoor overhead, and they stepped out on the roof. Up there all was wind and gloom. Their footsteps creaked dismally against the gritty surface. All around them loomed the ghostly shapes of tall buildings. Masses of clouds hung scowling over their heads, and there was a suspicion of moisture in the air.

Cole stepped to the fire escape in the rear, the lawyer following. They looked down over the parapet into a wide court flanked by murky walls. "Yes," said Carlin, more to himself than to his companion, "the body of Reeves was probably carried down this fire escape. It could have been done."

Cole nodded. "I wonder," he said abstractedly, "how far down it was carried?"

"Have you any reason for supposing that it wasn't carried clear down to the ground?"

"No, only a hunch, and most hunches are ridiculous. They go contrary to facts and logic. But just now I am more interested in what happened to McKendrick. He must have discovered something very important to warrant the scoundrels killing him. I wonder what it could have been."

"The other end of the wire, of course."

"Something more than that, I think." Cole gazed down the long stretch of flights and landings that composed the fire escape. "Criminals of that type never kill without good cause. Not because they shrink from murder on moral or humanitarian grounds, but because it is dangerous and inexpedi-

ent. McKendrick must have discovered something that—— By the way, Carlin, I suppose The Unknown Seven controls the renting of offices in this building? You told me once that it is property of the organization."

"It is, but the members individually have nothing to do with the management of the building. That is handled through a separate corporation. Why do you ask?"

"No particular reason. Those infernal hunches are bothering me more than usual to-night. Suppose you wait here while I investigate."

Before the lawyer could answer, Cole had flung himself over the parapet and was gliding down the fire escape with the agility of a chimpanzee. On the first landing he stopped and once more took out his electric flash and magnifying lens. Then he turned to the window and carefully examined the frame in the neighborhood of the fastenings. Tiny marks, that had a fresh appearance, told him they had been tampered with not so long ago. McKendrick, following the winding course of the dictaphone wire, had probably passed through this same window.

In a few moments Cole was inside. Before him stretched a long hall with doors on either side; but the one to his left was the only one that interested him. He looked for a moment at the numerals 2512 and the lettering on the frosted pane. Once before in the past twelve hours the same sign had confronted him. While tracing Englebreth's movements in the early afternoon Cole had come to this

same door, and then he had turned back in the belief that nothing could be gained by going farther.

"Bureau of Civic Research," he read, wondering whether McKendrick had followed the course of the wire through this same door. Cole had no particular reason for thinking so, for at least twenty other doors opened into the same hall. Yet, in view of Englebreth's apparent familiarity with Cole's movements during the past few days, he could not help wondering. If the dictaphone wire had extended into suite 2512, then the source of Englebreth's information was clear.

But the theory explained nothing else, and Cole had no proof that the wire had entered the office of the Bureau of Civic Research. His only clew was the scratches on the window frame, and they merely indicated that McKendrick had been on this floor. For all Cole knew, the young operative might have continued his search farther down.

Yet the door continued to tantalize him. With a glance over his shoulder to see if perchance a watchman was near, he tried the knob. As he had expected, the door was locked, but he stooped and looked closely at the little circle of brass that formed the outer portion of the spring lock. The hall light was dim, so he once more took out his electric flash. Close to the center of the circle, just beside the keyhole, he saw a slight scratch. It was almost certain now that McKendrick had picked the lock and passed through the door.

From his pocket Cole drew a bunch of carefully selected keys. Soon the door was open, and he walked in and quickly closed it behind him. Then

he took out his flash, not thinking it safe to turn on the light, and made a swift inspection of the premises.

There were two rooms, a larger and a smaller one. After a glance over the floor and walls, Cole's face fell. The thing which he had vaguely and without much reason expected to find was not there. It was just an ordinary suite of offices, containing the ordinary set of office furniture. A glance into the filing cabinets left him in no doubt as to the bona-fide character of the Bureau of Civic Research.

On one of the desks in the inner office were several typewritten letters. At the top of each sheet were printed the name of the concern and a list of its officers, and he noticed that Englebreth was mentioned as one of the honorary vice presidents. The letters had, in fact, been dictated by Englebreth, for in the lower left-hand corner of each one were the initials HE-MS. No doubt he had dictated them that afternoon and expected to sign them later. A glance told Cole that they pertained to political matters and dealt in detail with the availability of a certain candidate for alderman.

He put the letters down. They confirmed a theory that he had formed that afternoon that the Bureau of Civic Research was a hobby of Englebreth's. Like many another rich man, his former client presumably felt the need of justifying his existence in some way. Cole felt satisfied on that point, but there were other doubts in his mind. It was just possible that the rooms of the bureau were being used clandestinely by persons who were in the habit of sneaking in there at night. Being close

to the fire escape they were within easy reach of the headquarters of The Unknown Seven. The guess was rather far-fetched, but it seemed to explain several things.

Knowing that Carlin was waiting for him on the roof, and seeing that his quest was unavailing, Cole put out his flash and moved toward the door. He had advanced only a few steps when something prompted him to halt. A vague impression that some one had stopped outside the door came to him. He tiptoed to a corner of the room and waited. Presently he heard a key grate in the lock, and then the door came open. It was beginning to look as though his suspicions had been correct, that persons other than the regular tenants were visiting the offices at night.

A light appeared in the outer room. Next he heard some one move across the floor. From his position, in the corner of the inner office, Cole could not see who the newcomer was, and he did not care to make his own presence known just yet.

The footsteps were coming toward him, and Cole pressed close to the corner, as a figure appeared in the doorway. The footfalls gave him a queer sensation. He thought he recognized the plopping little sounds, suggestive of a walker who, instead of putting most of his weight on his heels, places his entire foot on the ground at once.

While still within the doorway the newcomer reached out a hand and touched a switch on the inner wall. In the light that suddenly appeared, Cole saw that he had identified the footfalls accurately. The man was Professor Carmody, and

Cole's eyes narrowed as he recognized him. The scientist wore a faded silk hat and a long overcoat, just as Cole had seen him when he walked into Doctor Latham's house the day before, and under his arm he carried a large umbrella. He walked straight to the middle of the office before he saw Cole, and then he stopped so abruptly that it seemed as if his gaunt form would topple over.

"Hello," he said, staring out of his small, mouse-colored eyes. His long nose, much too large for symmetry, was turned up, and his parted lips showed two rows of yellow teeth. He was plainly embarrassed, and to conceal the fact he grinned ostentatiously.

"Good evening, professor," said Cole, stepping forward. Though this was their first meeting at close quarters, he had reason to believe that Carmody knew who he was. Miss Brownell, he recalled, had told him that the professor was well aware that Cole had been watching him from a distance for some time.

"Are you connected with the Bureau of Civic Research, professor?" Cole went on.

"In a way, yes," said Carmody. He had a very thin voice that had a habit of rising to a shrill pitch, or falling to a faint murmur, without regard to what he was saying. He peered at Cole in an apologetic way. "I don't believe I've had the pleasure of meeting you before."

"Don't you know who I am?"

Carmody wagged his head. "I can't say that I do."

"Too bad, professor. I was in hopes that you

would remember me. One doesn't like to ask favors of strangers."

"Favors?" Carmody's face took on a forbidding frown. "You wish to ask a favor of me?"

"Just a slight one. There is a book in your library that is very hard to obtain, and I am very anxious to read it. The author is one James Price."

The professor looked at him hard and long. "You are mistaken," he said finally in a very low tone. "The author whom you mention is not in my collection. May I ask what led you to think that I own the book in question?"

"A little bird told me."

"You take your information from curious sources."

"One has to, sometimes. By the way, professor, aren't you keeping rather queer office hours? It is, let me see, a quarter past one."

"I might ask the same question of yourself."

"That's so; you might."

"I might also ask what you are doing here. It is my impression that you do not belong on the premises."

"Hope I am not in the way. Please go ahead and attend to whatever business brought you here."

But Carmody seemed in no hurry. Cole could not know whether it was because he had abundant leisure on his hands, or because he did not care to attend to his business in another man's presence, but it was evident that the professor was not disposed to gratify his curiosity. Now and then his mousey little eyes moved furtively about the room,

and once they rested in a designing way on one of the flat-top desks. Cole, following his glance, was vaguely puzzled.

"Pardon me, but aren't you trespassing?" inquired Carmody after a pause.

Cole folded his arms and smiled genially. "You are not going to order me out, I hope?"

"Suppose I should do that?"

"I would overlook your rudeness and refuse to take the hint. If you insisted, I might invite you to try to put me out. If you should make such an attempt and fail at it, I would suggest calling the police to your assistance. But I don't think you will go that far, professor. You might be called upon to explain your own presence here, and that would prove embarrassing."

There was a calculating gleam in Carmody's eyes. Cole, with a picture in his mind of Carlin waiting for him impatiently on the roof, was anxious to bring the interview to a climax. He had no intention of leaving until he had learned the object of the professor's visit.

Once more Carmody looked stealthily about the room, and again his glance rested on the desk. Cole's lids narrowed, as he perceived that the desk, which seemed to be the object of the professor's interest, was the one on which lay Englebreth's unfinished letters. There were three other desks in the room, so it seemed odd that Carmody should center his attention on this particular one. Cole had already discovered that the drawers were empty, and that the desk contained nothing except the papers lying on top. Strange though it seemed, it

looked as though the scientist's visit to the office at this late hour was in some way concerned with the letters Englebreth had dictated that afternoon.

The theory seemed rather far-fetched, so Cole decided to test it. He moved leisurely about the room a few times, then stopped before the desk at which the professor's sly glances had been directed. In a casual manner he picked up the letters, looked hastily at two or three, then folded them across the middle and stuck them into his pocket.

He knew, even before the letters reached his pocket, that his suspicion had been well founded. Carmody had watched his every move with growing excitement. His expression had changed from bewilderment to dismay, and finally his face took on a look of sullen determination.

"What are you doing with those letters?" he demanded.

"Taking them home," said Cole easily, at the same time moving toward the door.

"Wait!" said the professor sternly.

Cole turned around and watched him with amusement. "What's the matter?" he asked innocently. "What are these letters to you?"

"You shall not leave this office with them. Give them to me at once."

He reached out a hand, and Cole saw that it trembled. Evidently he was desperately intent upon obtaining possession of the letters. Cole was at a loss to understand, for he knew that the epistles dealt with political affairs that could be of no vital concern to a man like the professor.

"Don't excite yourself," he said quietly. "There's

nothing in these letters that would interest you. They contain nothing but dry political rot. What do you care about that sort of thing?"

"Are you going to surrender them?" demanded Carmody, and the words sounded like an ultimatum.

"I'll promise to consider it if you will tell me why you want them."

The professor regarded him queerly. A look of bewilderment crossed his sullenly determined face. His crafty little eyes seemed to be trying to read Cole's hidden thoughts. "Why pretend you don't know?" he asked; then, in wheedling tones: "Come now! The joke has gone far enough. I know you are only trying to tease an old man. The letters, please."

Cole shook his head. Carmody's very insistence upon obtaining the letters was reason enough why Cole should not give them up. Once more he started for the door, but a sharp "Wait!" interrupted his progress.

Cole turned slowly and looked into the barrel of a pistol in Carmody's hand.

"My dear friend," said the professor in his softest, lowest tones, "please do not force me to take drastic measures. It would grieve me exceedingly to have to deal harshly with you. The letters, please!"

CHAPTER XVIII

THE LIGHT IN THE WINDOW

COLE'S only response to Professor Carmody's soft-spoken ultimatum was a smile. He knew that the scientist was the kind of foe who is the most dangerous when he uses his gentlest tones. It struck him as droll that he was risking his life for the sake of a few letters which, as far as he could see, he could put to no earthly use. He would not know what to do with them even if he should be able to depart with them safely. It was only Carmody's earnestness in the matter that convinced him the letters must have a hidden significance.

"Well, professor," he said easily, "it looks like a deadlock. I don't want to give up the letters, and you seem in no hurry to shoot."

The professor smiled still more blandly and took a tighter grip on the pistol. Cole believed he would shoot rather than see him depart with the letters. There was a certain grimness about the gaunt form and the sallow face which warned him that Carmody was playing a desperate game for high stakes. As often happens in tense moments, his mind turned to trivial things. He pictured Carlin waiting peevishly on the roof. He imagined Ballinger in the midst of another humorous yarn. A ludicrous vision of the hunchback, chained to the operating table in Doctor Latham's house, flitted through his mind.

But the pistol in Carmody's hand baffled him. He

felt no fear, but neither did he care to throw his life away needlessly. Once before in the past forty-eight hours he had looked into the muzzle of a pistol, but that one had been in Doctor Latham's hand. He had laughed then and dared the physician to shoot, knowing that Latham, whatever other villainies he might be guilty of, was not the type that can shoot down a defenseless man in cold blood. He was too proud and high-spirited for that. With Carmody it was different. The professor was made of coarser stuff. He was not hampered by considerations of chivalry and fair play. He would shoot as soon as Cole's back was turned.

And so he restrained the impulse to laugh in the professor's face and walk away. He preferred to bide his chance and watch for a sign of wavering in the hand that held the pistol. Growing tired of waiting, he decided to try a little stratagem that he had found successful in the past. It was a simple trick and based on one of the many queer antics of the human mind.

He looked away from the pistol and began to gaze fixedly at a point on the opposite wall. Moments passed and grew into minutes, and still he stared rigidly, not a muscle in his face moving. His eyes were slanting upward, at a level of about a foot and a half above the professor's head. The latter could not see what he was looking at, for he dared not turn his head, knowing that Cole would jump the moment he did so. At first he was mildly puzzled. Then his face showed signs of bewilderment. His curiosity changed into nervous concern.

By and by he seemed plainly worried. It was

evident that Cole's fixed and silent scrutiny of something which the professor could not see was seriously affecting his nerves.

Cole's rapt expression did not change in the slightest degree. He just looked and looked at that blank point somewhere behind the professor's back and just above his head. Carmody grew more and more disconcerted. A tension, which he was doing his best to check, was taking hold of him. He shifted from one foot to the other. A sense of something weird and unaccountable was stealing over him, despite his scientific poise of mind.

At last came the chance for which Cole had waited. It was merely an uneasy flicker in Carmody's eyes, accompanied by a slight turn of the head. It was not much, but Cole knew that, for the moment, the professor's mind was diverted from the pistol. It was risky, but he might not get another chance. He flexed his muscles, and leaped, first to one side, then straight at Carmody, wrenching the pistol from his hand.

A squeallike cry broke from the professor's lips. Cole chuckled as he ran. The scientist started in pursuit, but Cole slammed the door in his face. In another instant, putting the pistol in his pocket, he was climbing through the window. Soon he was hurrying up the fire escape. A dark figure, with coat tails flapping in the wind, hastened toward him, as he swung over the parapet and landed on the roof.

"Where on earth have you been?" asked Carlin reproachfully. "I was just on the point of going down to look for you."

"Is there a man on the staff who understands ciphers?" inquired Cole, taking the lawyer's arm and hurrying him down from the roof.

"Ciphers? Why, yes. Findlay Abbott is one of the best cipher experts in the country. What do you want of him?"

"Find him and send him to my office," said Cole hurriedly. Leaving the bewildered lawyer several paces behind, he ran down the corridor and entered his office. He had been there only a few moments when Abbott, a fat and pink-faced little man, trundled in. Behind him walked Carlin. Cole took the letters from his pocket and handed them to the expert.

"See if you can make anything out of these, Abbott," he directed. "All I know about them is that they are so important to one man that he was ready to shoot me on account of them. They may be in code."

Abbott looked as though he relished the task. He sat down, wiped his spectacles, and fell to work. In the meantime Cole told the lawyer of the episode in room 2512.

Carlin's eyes popped as he listened. He glanced with keen interest at the papers under Abbott's nose. "You don't think the offices of the Bureau of Civic Research are the headquarters of the gang we are fighting?"

"No," said Cole thoughtfully. "In the morning you might inquire of your agent how long the bureau has been located there. From what I saw, though, it looked as though the concern was on the square. It's more likely that certain parties are

using the offices as a listening post, because of their close proximity to this establishment. Knowing that we are fighting them, those fellows naturally want to find out how much we know and what our plans are. I have a strong suspicion that the dictaphone wires ran into the rooms below. What do you make of those letters, Abbott?"

But Abbott was too deeply engrossed in his task to hear the question. The other two watched him in silence for a time. His puckered brow told that the letters presented a knotty problem. Finally he looked up.

"No code here," he declared. "These are just ordinary letters."

"Sure of that?" demanded Cole sharply.

"As sure as one can be of anything. I'll wager my salary for the next ten years that these are just plain letters."

"Then why did Carmody——" Cole suddenly gave the desk a resounding thwack. A light of comprehension dawned in his eyes. "I take my hat off to the professor. He is a slick little trickster. He wanted to get me away from there, having private business to attend to, and so he pulled the wool over my eyes and made me think that these letters were a matter of life or death. Carlin, I'm a boob!"

He bounded from the office, leaving the lawyer and Abbott to stare at each other. He was angry, but only with himself. For the crafty professor he felt an unwilling admiration, but he was also determined not to let Carmody have the last laugh.

The discovery that Englebreth's letters were genuine had given him a sharp mental jolt. A suspicion

had been gradually assuming shape and clarity in his mind, but the cipher expert's report had uprooted it completely. All that those letters now meant to Cole was a wasted hour and a sense of humiliation.

He hurried up to the roof, then down the fire escape, and soon he stood once more outside the door of room 2512. Carmody had had ample time to dispose of whatever business had brought him there, but it was just possible that he had not yet left, so Cole entered as quietly as he could. The moment he closed the door behind him he knew he was too late. The light that appeared at his touch on the button revealed two empty rooms.

Cole moved forward, looking sharply over walls and behind furniture. Perhaps Carmody had accidentally left some clew to his mysterious errand. It was even possible that Cole might get an inkling as to the discovery that had cost McKendrick his life. He searched carefully, but at first with no results. There were fresh, but very faint, footprints on the floor, and he could easily locate the spot where he and Carmody had stood, while the professor was pointing the pistol at him. Which way had Carmody turned after Cole left the offices? The footprints reached to the door and then back into the inner office. Evidently Carmody had locked himself in before attending to his errand. With some difficulty Cole traced the faint marks across the floor, muttering a short exclamation when he found that they led straight to the safe, standing in a corner of the room.

Cole had given the safe only a cursory glance on his previous visit to the office. Carmody's en-

trance had prevented him from making a more careful examination. Now he saw that the safe was one of the best and latest makes. There was a look of freshness about the blue steel surface and the bright nickel trimmings which suggested it had not been there long. He remembered that this particular brand of safe, in addition to its other advertised merits, was supposed to be air-tight and absolutely burglar proof. It seemed rather large for a concern whose affairs were transacted in two small rooms, but, perhaps, it had been selected with a view to growing needs.

The course of the footprints made it plain that Carmody's errand had been related to the safe in some way, but that was as far as Cole's deductions reached. Whether the professor had removed something from the steel box, or put something in, he had no means of knowing, and the locked door prevented him from gratifying his curiosity on that point. It did not stop him from exercising his imagination, however. With a grim nod and a tightening of the lips he made a guess in regard to Carmody's business with the safe.

There was nothing more he could do for the present, so he made his way back to the headquarters of The Unknown Seven. In the hall he met Carlin.

"Well?" asked the lawyer. "Found out anything?"

"The more I find out about this case the less I know," confessed Cole. "All the same, I think I know what it was McKendrick saw that cost him his life."

Carlin's brows came up.

"But I'm not going to tell you what it was," Cole added quickly. "I may be mistaken, you see, and I don't propose to jeopardize my reputation with you. By the way, there's a new safe in number 2512, as nifty an article of that kind as I ever saw. Pretty good size, too. Big enough for a man of your dimensions to sit down in, Carlin."

"You're not going to ask me to crawl into it, I hope?"

"No, nothing like that. I just have a hunch that in the morning that safe is going to be taken out of 2512."

"Anything unusual in that?"

"Nothing at all, and that's just what certain parties are counting on, I think. There are times when it is expedient to do the unusual thing under cover of the usual. I want you to detail a man to see what happens to that safe, Carlin."

The lawyer nodded, but in the next instant his eyes opened wide in astonishment. "You don't think that——"

"As I said before," Cole interrupted, "I don't care to risk my reputation on a guess that may prove unfounded. Seen anything of Ballinger lately?"

"Not for half an hour or so. Been busy in the main office."

Cole gave him a keen glance. "What's the matter, Carlin? You look worried."

The lawyer forced a smile. "It's just a—a premonition. I guess that's what you would call it. I have a feeling that the gang knows we are closing in around them, and that they are getting ready

to cash in. We must strike quickly, or it will be too late."

"I don't know but what you are right. I've felt something of the same kind myself. We must not only strike quickly, but with both fists." As if he had meant it literally, Cole looked down at his clenched hands.

"But where, Cole? Where are we going to strike? We don't know who the leader of the gang is. That is, we can't be sure. We don't know where the plant is located. We don't even know——"

"You make me dizzy," said Cole with a chuckle, and then he turned abruptly and walked into his private office. There he pressed a button, and in a few moments Sambo entered.

"Ask Miss Brownell to step in here," Cole told the big negro.

Sambo's eyes opened wide, showing a generous expanse of white. "Why, she done lef' a hour ago, sah. She went out in a mighty rush, too."

"Sure of that, Sambo?"

"Course I's sure. I seed her mahself. It was just after Doc Ballinger lef', sah."

"Doctor Ballinger?"

"Yes, sah. The doc looked lahk he was wurried. The wurriedest man I eveh seed, sah. He tried not to let on, but he didn't fool mah a-tall, sah."

"And you say Miss Brownell left shortly afterward?"

"Yes, sah. Not more'n a minute, sah."

Cole jumped up from his chair. For a moment he stared at the gigantic negro, then waved a hand in dismissal. He had instructed Miss Brownell to

put one of the men on Ballinger's trail, in case the physician should go out. Now it seemed evident that the girl herself had started out to shadow the doctor. Cole could only hope that her audacity would not lead her into trouble. His acquaintance with women had been only casual, and he had an impression that they either fainted in a crisis, or else burst into tears. Miss Brownell was, of course, a variant from the usual type, but just the same——

Cole sat down again. After all, he could no nothing for the present, and Miss Brownell seemed to have a surprising capacity for taking care of herself. He would stay close to the telephone, and, in due time, she would undoubtedly call him up. He waited, but the instrument at his side remained tantalizingly silent. When at length it shrilled a summons, he jumped nervously.

But the person calling was not Miss Brownell. Instead, it was Sloane, the operative whom Cole had detailed to watch Doctor Latham's residence. Latham and the hunchback had been far from his mind for several hours.

"What is it, Sloane?" he asked quietly.

Sloane reported that for the last hour a mysterious light had appeared at intervals in one of the windows of the doctor's house. It might mean anything or nothing, and Sloane did not know what to make of it, so he was telephoning in for instructions.

"Stay where you are," Cole told him. "I'll be with you in a little while."

For a few moments longer he sat at the desk, his mind working quickly. It was just possible that

at Latham's house he would find some clew to the movements of Ballinger and Miss Brownell. There was a fog in his mind, the result of too many conflicting developments, but there were a few things that seemed clear.

Soon he was out on the street. In less than half an hour he reached the corner nearest Latham's house and walked east on the opposite side of the street. He cast sharp glances into the shadows along the row of buildings. Suddenly he stopped. "Sloane," he said in a low tone.

The scholarly looking operative stepped out of a gloomy doorway. "Glad you came, sir," he whispered. "Things look queer."

"What about the light you mentioned?"

"It comes and goes, every two minutes or so. Look! There it is!"

He pointed to a window on the second floor of the physician's residence. A small, flickering light had just appeared. It wavered for a few moments, then faded out. The two men waited in silence, and presently the mysterious light came back. All the other windows were dark, and the solitary glow had an eerie look.

"Stay here," said Cole. "Don't move unless I signal you by whistling three times from one of the windows."

Briskly he crossed the street. A bunch of skeleton keys rattled in his hand, as he vanished from sight in the dark basement entrance.

CHAPTER XIX

A WARNING

VERY softly Cole crept up the stairs. On the ground floor he stopped for a moment and listened. A heavy silence seemed to hover over the entire house. He stole up another flight of stairs and turned toward a door in front. The knob turned noiselessly in his hand, but the door was locked. He stooped and tried to peep through the keyhole, but he could see nothing.

A few moments passed; then a slight scratching sound, like that produced when a match is struck, was heard within. At the same time a faint glow was visible through the keyhole. It lasted for ten seconds or so, and then all was darkness again. It was evident now that the intermittent glow which Cole had seen from the sidewalk had been produced by some one striking a number of matches.

Suddenly he stood erect, listening. For a moment he thought he had heard a slight sound, coming from somewhere below, but apparently he had been mistaken. He had entered so quietly that it did not seem possible Doctor Latham's sleep could have been disturbed by his movements. Again he fixed his attention on the door, for once more a scrrrrch came from the room. Through the keyhole, just before the fluttering light went out, he caught a glimpse of the hunchback.

Cole was puzzled. What could the hunchback

be doing, and what did the frequent striking of matches mean? He waited, uncertain what to do, but strongly tempted to open the door with one of his skeleton keys. Moments passed, and he listened in vain for further repetitions of the scratching sounds. Instead, he heard what sounded like a half-suppressed chuckle. Evidently the hunchback had found something that pleased him. A faint tinkle came through the keyhole, followed by a louder sound, like that of a heavy object being dragged across the floor. Then silence.

Cole felt in his pockets for his bunch of keys, but he quickly withdrew his hand and cast a glance over his shoulders. This time he knew he was not mistaken. Some one was moving about on the floor below, but so softly that Cole's keen ears detected only a faint suspicion of a sound. His eyes darted to left and right in search of a hiding place, but the best he could find was the corner back of the stairway railing. He pressed against the wall and crouched low.

Some one was coming up the stairs. He was determined to learn as much as he could before he made his presence known. The meager light from the little electric bulb in the ceiling revealed a sweep of bald cranium, by which he easily identified Doctor Latham. Perhaps he had been awakened by the hunchback's movements, or perhaps Cole's entrance had partly aroused him, and he had just now become fully awake.

The doctor swept past him without a glance in his direction and moved straight toward the room occupied by the hunchback. There he stopped, took

a key from his pocket and unlocked the door. He pushed it open and stood in a listening attitude. Even from his remote position in the rear of the hall, he could hear a lusty snoring. It was strange, since he knew that the hunchback had been wide awake only a few minutes ago. Evidently the fellow was up to a ruse of some kind.

Suddenly Latham turned and walked quickly toward the rear. For a moment Cole thought he had been discovered, but the doctor took only half a dozen steps down the hall. Standing on the stairway railing he removed the electric bulb from its socket in the ceiling, then entered the hunchback's room. The hall was now dark, and Cole thought it safe to come forward. He reached the door just as a light appeared within. Peeping through the crack between the door and the jamb he saw that the physician had attacked the bulb to a wall fixture. Now he was standing beside the operating table to which the hunchback had been linked for the past twenty-four hours, leaning over the motionless figure lying on it.

He mumbled something beneath his breath, then gave the hunchback's shoulder a vigorous shaking. The snoring stopped. The fellow sat up with difficulty and rubbed his eyes with his free hand.

"You needn't pretend," said Latham. He was arrayed in the same dressing gown in which Cole had seen him once before. "I know you haven't been sleeping. Where did you find these matches?"

He pointed to a litter of charred stubs on the floor. The hunchback eyed him stolidly and shrugged his misshapen shoulders.

The doctor's glance went to an old battered safe in a corner of the room. He stepped up to it and tried the lock.

"Thought you might be tempted to while away the time by investigating this old safe of mine," he declared. "I removed the bulb on purpose, so you wouldn't make much headway with it. Not that you would have found much if you had opened it, only a few papers."

Again he gazed at the charred fragments scattered over the floor. Cole, looking through the narrow crack, saw a puzzled frown on his bearded face. The room was small, and the conglomeration of articles in it suggested it was used in part for storage purposes. The scattered match stubs perplexed Cole as much as they did the doctor.

"There might have been a box in one of the bureau drawers," muttered the physician. "I suppose that's where you found them. I don't see, though, what pleasure you derive from burning up a lot of matches."

Cole was watching the hunchback's face. A look of sly satisfaction lurked in the sallow features Once the fellow bent a squinting glance on some object across the floor, but all Cole could see at that particular point was a dilapidated trunk. His bewilderment grew. The scene between the physician and the hunchback was not exactly what he might have suspected. He sensed a hidden element in it. He was aware of a curious strain and tension in the air.

"I thought I heard you drag the table over the

floor," remarked the doctor. "You were not doing it just for exercise. What was your idea?"

Again a look of secret elation crossed the hunchback's face. He jingled the steel links that held one of his hands to the table.

"Aw, can't a guy move about a bit if he wants to?" he asked. "Sittin' still in one place all the time gets on a feller's nerve. I didn't do no harm."

The physician regarded him searchingly. Evidently he, too, had seen the furtive smirk in the hunchback's face. He stepped briskly to the operating cot and shook the fellow's arm.

"I'm not so sure about that," he remarked. "You have been up to some kind of deviltry, my man. Now——"

The sentence ended in a gasp. In a twinkling the hunchback had wrenched his arm free of the doctor's grasp. Cole was amazed at the swift play of his fingers. He could scarcely see what was happening, but a loop fell down over the physician's head and was tightened around his throat with a quick jerk. He spluttered and choked, while the hunchback snickered gleefully.

"I got yuh now!" declared the little man, drawing the loop still tighter. The doctor wriggled and squirmed, but the constriction at his throat weakened his efforts. The whole scene seemed unreal to Cole. It took him several moments to realize that Latham was being garroted by the man who had found refuge in his house after murdering Malcolm Reeves.

He bounded forward, and a well-aimed blow sent the hunchback reeling back over the operating

table. The garrote, made up of two shoe laces tied together, had bitten deep into the flesh around the doctor's throat. His eyes bulged, and his gaping lips were bloodless. A hoarse rattle sounded in his throat, as he struggled for breath.

In a short time the noose was undone, and the physician sank into a chair. While he sucked air into his lungs in great gulps he looked queerly at Cole. The hunchback lay sullenly silent on the table.

"Your visit was very opportune this time," murmured Latham, as soon as he began to breathe more easily. "Where did you come from?"

Cole signified with a shrug that the matter was of no importance. "What's gotten into this protégé of yours?" he asked with a glance at the hunchback. "Did he go crazy all of a sudden?"

"Oh, no; he's as sane this moment as he ever was or ever will be. I knew he would kill me if he got a chance, and so I did all I could to deprive him of the opportunity."

There was doubt and bewilderment in Cole's gaze. "But why should he kill you? I thought——"

"Yes, I think I know what you thought," interrupted the doctor. "For a man of keen intellect you have a singular capacity for getting things twisted. I suppose, however, it isn't to be wondered at under the circumstances. Wonder where the fellow got those shoe laces. I thought I had removed from his reach everything that might serve as an implement of murder."

Cole stepped to the trunk at which the hunchback had been squinting from time to time. He

lifted the lid, and the first thing he saw was a pair of old shoes from which the laces had been removed.

Latham looked at him in surprise. "That trunk was locked this morning," he remarked.

"The lock is a very simple one," Cole observed. "Even a man with only one arm could pick it without much trouble. With a supply of matches handy, the removal of the electric bulb didn't give him much of a handicap. You seem to lead a very exciting life, doctor."

The doctor smiled. He felt quite at ease again. He got up from the chair and strolled over to the table where the hunchback lay.

"You are really very simple," he declared. "Didn't you know that murdering me wouldn't help you out of your predicament? Why, you would have starved to death if you had carried out your attempt."

"Guess again." The fellow leered insolently. "My pals woulda found me before long. To-night, maybe."

"What's your grudge against the doctor?" inquired Cole. "Why did you try to kill him?"

"Why don't you ask him?" retorted the hunchback, wagging his head in the physician's direction.

"Our friend doesn't seem very communicative," observed Latham. "I don't think he will attempt any more mischief to-night. Suppose we go down and sample one of my cigars?"

Cole assented, but not until he had searched the hunchback and removed a handful of matches. He believed the doctor knew the motive behind the murderous attempt. There was a fog in his mind, for

the scene he had just witnessed did not seem to harmonize with his previous observations.

"You are a cool one, doctor," he remarked when they were down in the consultation room and the physician had passed his box of cigars.

"Life hardens one. I sometimes wish I hadn't lost my emotional susceptibilities. They are the things that give color and tone to life. Life without thrills is a barren desert."

Cole suddenly recalled his original errand. He bent forward and looked the doctor full in the eyes. "There is one question I want to ask. You may not be able or willing to answer it. Where is Miss Brownell?"

The question acted like an electric shock on the physician, upsetting his magnificent composure as nothing else could have done. A suspicion of pallor crept up beneath the black beard.

"What about her?" he demanded sharply. "Has anything happened to her?"

Cole smiled amusedly. "For a man who has lost his emotional susceptibilities you manage to work up quite a lot of feeling over a simple question. You know the lady I am referring to?"

"Why—er—slightly."

Cole gave him a hard, searching glance. He felt the doctor had deliberately understated the truth. "Miss Brownell disappeared this evening," he announced. "I came here in the hope of learning something of her whereabouts from you."

"Why from me?" Latham was laboring under a tension that he tried hard to suppress.

"Several trails seem to point in your direction,

doctor. Do you know what has become of Miss Brownell?"

Latham gripped the arms of his chair. "I swear I haven't the faintest idea," he declared, looking Cole straight in the eyes.

Cole believed him. There was something in the doctor's tone and manner that carried conviction. He knew that for once the man was not shamming. His gaze cut deep into the physician's bewildering personality, and he found not a trace of duplicity.

"What is Miss Brownell to you?" he asked bluntly. "Not in love with her, are you, doctor?"

The bearded lips parted in a faint smile. "I admire her immensely. Have known her for a long time. Was a friend of her father's. A very charming young person indeed. But at my age one hesitates before he permits himself to fall in love. Besides, Miss Brownell is not likely to entertain any romantic notions in regard to me."

Cole nodded thoughtfully. Despite the doctor's light tone and airy gestures, the real Dickson Latham stood revealed before him.

"I understand, doctor," he said meaningly. "I see how it is with you. As for Miss Brownell, she left a certain place, about an hour and a half ago, in pursuit of a colleague of yours, Doctor Ballinger."

A queer little mutter slipped from Latham's lips. He clenched his hands convulsively; his face underwent a startling transformation; a mingling of hate and fear showed in his dark, flashing eyes.

"That hound!" he mumbled under his breath, evidently not intending Cole to hear. With an inward

wrench he steadied himself; in the next moment he seemed cool and composed. "In that case we must endeavor to find her," he added aloud.

"More easily said than done, doctor. Have you any idea where Ballinger might have taken her, in the event that she should have fallen into his hands?"

"There is one place he would naturally take her to, but I don't know the geographical location of it."

"In plain words, the headquarters of a certain gang of alchemists and cutthroats?"

Latham nodded.

"You are mixed up with this gang, aren't you, doctor?"

"I was."

"And you performed an operation on Malcolm Reeves?" Cole watched him closely to observe the effect of his question.

"That is true," said Latham in a queer tone. He smiled a sad, whimsical smile. "But you must have observed that truth sometimes covers a multitude of lies."

Cole pondered this cryptical statement. "One more question. Why did the hunchback try to kill you?"

"Some men are willing to do anything for money. But this line of talk isn't leading us anywhere. The thing of prime importance is to find Miss Brownell. From what little I know of the gang, to which you referred, I should say her life isn't worth a plugged nickel if she has fallen into their hands."

He spoke evenly, but Cole sensed an ache behind

the words. "Do you know the leader of the organization?" was his next question.

"He was never referred to by name in my presence, and I never came in contact with him. In my dealings with the members I never got higher than Professor Carmody."

Again, despite the contradictions and discrepancies that hemmed in the doctor's statements, Cole was disposed to believe him. "There is no cause for alarm just at present," he declared. "We don't know that Miss Brownell is in trouble. She is a capable young woman and——"

"Ah, but you don't know Ballinger," interrupted Latham.

Cole reached for the telephone and called the number of The Unknown Seven. After a brief delay he was connected with Carlin.

"Where are you?" demanded the lawyer excitedly. "Been trying to get hold of you everywhere."

"What has happened?" asked Cole evenly, though the lawyer's agitation was contagious.

"Happened!" echoed Carlin. "Received an anonymous telephone message a while ago warning us that, unless we keep hands off, Miss Brownell will be dead inside twenty-four hours!"

CHAPTER XX

THE VENEER OF INTELLIGENCE

THE doctor's face betrayed his anxiety, as Cole repeated what he had just heard over the telephone.

"That settles it," muttered the physician. "We must find Miss Brownell at once."

Cole nodded. For several minutes he had been watching the physician closely. It was as if a veil had been removed from one phase of Latham's many-sided character. Cole looked through the contradictions of his personality, and he knew that on one point, at least, the doctor was sincere. That was in his attitude toward Miss Brownell.

"There's no hurry," he said calmly. "Nothing is going to happen to her for twenty-four hours."

"But why delay?"

"Because we can do nothing else. Another reason is that I need sleep. The third reason is Toots."

"Toots?" Lathem frowned. "Who is Toots?"

"The most distracted cat in the State of New York at the present moment. My rooms were invaded by prowlers this afternoon, everything thrown helter-skelter, and Toots just can't bear fuss of any kind. She is a very temperamental cat, doctor. You will hear from me in the morning."

He left the scowling physician and walked toward the door. There he stopped and looked back.

"Don't worry," he said. "We will see Miss Brownell out of this. There's something of a plan buzzing around in my mind. So long, doctor."

Cole walked out. Despite his cheerful tone he was not altogether free from worry. The situation, as far as Miss Brownell was concerned, looked critical enough. With the fate of Reeves and McKendrick in mind, Cole knew the gang would not stop short of murder, if it suited their plans. The hope he had tried to instill in Doctor Latham was based on the advantages which he held over the other side. So far Ballinger did not know that he was being suspected, and this was an important point in Cole's favor. A man who thinks himself safe is apt to make blunders and become incautious. Another advantage lay in the fact that the conspirator's knew nothing of the deductions Cole had made from Carmody's visit to the offices of the Bureau of Civic Research, or of his suspicions in regard to the big safe standing there.

Cole went home, noticed with approval that Mrs. Armstrong had tidied up his rooms, and that Toots was sleeping tranquilly on her favorite cushion. In a few minutes Cole himself was sound asleep. Five hours he slept, and then he awoke clear-eyed and vigorous. After feeding Toots and getting his own breakfast, he went to the offices of The Unknown Seven. On his desk he found a note from Carlin announcing that the lawyer had, in accordance with Cole's instructions, detailed one of the operatives to watch room 2512 and report at once if the safe should be taken out.

Cole crumpled the note in his fist. It was yet

early, and only a few members of the staff were on duty. He went to the end of the hall and glanced into the room where the body of McKendrick lay. What to do with it was a delicate problem in view of the fact that the operations of The Unknown Seven were being conducted secretly. Perhaps the best way, was Cole's reflection, would be to encase it in a plain box and ship it anonymously to the morgue. Later, in some indirect way, he would endeavor to see that the hunchback was duly punished.

He locked the door of the little room and went back to his office. He had been there only a few minutes when Doctor Ballinger, after a discreet knock, stepped in.

"You are early, doctor," remarked Cole genially.

Ballinger sat down and crossed his long legs. "I've been looking for Miss Brownell," he explained. "Seen anything of her?"

"No," said Cole casually, knowing that the doctor was watching him keenly. "A bit too early for her, I guess. No doubt she will be strolling in soon."

"Making any progress?"

"Rome wasn't built in one day," said Cole evasively, knowing that the question was a subtle feeler. "I'm just taking hold of the job, you know."

"Still think there's a traitor among us?"

"I not only think it, but I am sure of it," declared Cole testily, as if reproaching himself for his failure to expose the renegade. He was on the point of saying more, but just then the telephone

rang. It was Fessenden, the operative who had been detailed to watch room 2512.

"They're just taking it out, sir," reported Fessenden, cautiously hiding the gist of his statement behind the neutral pronoun.

"Well, stay on the job and report developments to me," said Cole in tones that seemed to indicate that the matter was of no particular importance. "You see," he went on, turning to the doctor, as he hung up the receiver, "I spilled the beans at dinner. The traitor has had his warning, and from now on he will be a hard man to catch."

The doctor agreed with him. They discussed the matter from various angles and finally the telephone rang again. Fessenden reported that "it" had been loaded onto a truck.

"Stay with it," said Cole laconically. "Telephone me when you can." He was aware of a questioning gleam in the doctor's eyes, as he hung up, but he pretended to have noticed nothing. "Fessenden thinks he has come across a clew," he added for Ballinger's benefit. "Don't think it amounts to anything, but it's just as well to run it down."

"What sort of clew?"

"It seems to have something to do with the murder of Reeves," said Cole indifferently. "Not more than one clew out of twenty ever pans out, and I haven't much hope for this one."

The doctor seemed to have been deceived by his tone. After a few more remarks he walked out. In spite of what he had told Carlin the night before, he had been far from certain that the safe would be taken out; at any rate he had not expected it

would be done before another night. Fessenden's report had started a long train of thoughts in his mind.

Shortly before noon the lawyer walked in.

"I've just made some inquiries about the Bureau of Civic Research," he reported, after he had been told that there was no news of Miss Brownell. "There isn't the slightest doubt about its genuineness. Some of the biggest men in town belong to it. It's a sort of reform organization; interested in political uplift and that kind of thing. They've occupied the two offices down below ever since the building opened."

"That's interesting," said Cole, looking as if his trend of thought had taken a sharp quirk. "By the way, the safe was taken out of room 2512 a little while ago."

"Anything startling in that?"

"Well, it's just possible that, if we can follow the safe to its destination, we shall find Miss Brownell."

"How do you make that out? What has the safe to do with Miss Brownell?"

"My reasoning is based on the assumption that certain parties are as anxious to hide the one as the other. If that is so then it is only natural to suppose that they will hide both in one place. That safe, Carlin, represents our only hope of getting Miss Brownell out of danger."

The lawyer scratched his head thoughtfully. "I would advise you to move cautiously. Those blackguards would kill her without slightest hesitancy if——"

"Oh, I'll be careful," promised Cole. "All the same we must move quickly. I think your hunch yesterday was right, Carlin. The gang is getting ready to cash in their chips. They are holding the threat of death over Miss Brownell in the hope of influencing us through her and making us let them alone till after the clean-up. The miserable cowards are hiding behind a woman. The idea makes me mad clean through."

"You look it," observed Carlin. Shortly afterward he withdrew, and a little while later Fessenden telephoned that the safe had been transferred to a private yacht, moored at the foot of West One Hundred and Thirtieth Street. Fessenden did not know to whom the craft belonged. He added that it did not look as though the boat would start for a while, for the crew were on shore leave. Cole instructed him to report at once if it should appear that the yacht was about to sail.

"They'll probably wait till after dark," he told himself after Fessenden had finished. "Rather bold of them to put it aboard a yacht in broad daylight. Really no reason why they shouldn't, though," was his second thought. "As far as they know, nobody suspects anything. It would look as if the safe was being shipped to a summer home somewhere along the shore. Many people keep jewelry and other valuables in such places, and a safe comes in handy. And to transport it by water on a private yacht is less risky than intrusting it to the express companies. There'll be a merry little chase to-night."

Cole looked as if a whimsical idea had occurred to him. He called up Latham and inquired if the

doctor owned a motor boat. The physician replied that he did; it was a small affair, he explained, but a demon for speed. Cole promised that he would learn something interesting if he would have the boat ready within an hour, at a certain point along the river. Latham's imagination seemed to cover the gaps in Cole's statement, for he promptly agreed to do as suggested.

After giving several orders Cole left the office. His rendezvous with Latham was a short distance below the point where the larger craft was moored. Before boarding the doctor's boat Cole went cautiously forward and sought out Fessenden.

"The wind is slack, and the engine seems to be out of order," explained the operative. "I believe somebody is tinkering with it."

"Have you learned who owns the yacht?"

"I've made several inquiries, but nobody seems to know. She is brand-new, as you can see, and this appears to be the first time she has been anchored here."

Cole cast a glance at the queenly craft, its fresh coat of paint gleaming in the pale autumnal sunlight. After telling Fessenden that he could take the rest of the afternoon off he went back to Doctor Latham. The physician, looking fresh and crisp in blue coat and creamy flannel trousers, sat at the tiller.

"When do we start?" he inquired anxiously.

"We're waiting for the other party to make the first move," explained Cole, pointing out the larger boat, easily distinguishable among the craft of various types that littered the surface of the river.

"Any news of Miss Brownell?"

"Not a word, doctor. Are you in the mood for a little excitement?"

The physician said nothing, but his smile and the squaring of his shoulders spoke more loudly than words. Cole glanced out over the horizon. A frieze of clouds was creeping up in the south, and a rising wind rippled the water.

"I suppose you are armed?" he asked after a while.

The doctor slapped his hip pocket significantly "Are we likely to have a scrap?" he inquired in a tone hinting that the prospect appealed to him hugely.

"Quite likely! The rats are scenting danger and crawling into their hole. We may have to tackle a whole nest of them."

The afternoon waned and still they waited. Darkness fell, and a spanking breeze blew up. At Cole's suggestion the doctor moved the motor boat a little closer to the larger craft.

"They are hoisting the sail," observed Latham, as he brought the boat to a stop at a point from which they could watch the yacht without danger of being seen by its crew. Here and there the black ribbon of water was broken by twinkling lights. An excursion steamer swept majestically up the Hudson, with a tail of foaming silver in its wake.

Presently the yacht moved. The two men in the motor boat waited a while to give it headway. Then the doctor flipped the wheel, and, with a gleeful phut-phut, the little boat darted forward. Like an

animated thing it skipped giddily across the water, darting in and out among larger vessels. After a little the sprinkling of boats thinned out, and they hugged the shore closely, in order to avoid being seen by the yacht's crew.

"Think you can keep her in sight, doctor?" asked Cole, noticing with concern that the larger boat was gaining speed.

"Easily," said the doctor confidently, "unless the motor should start missing, and there's little danger of that."

They were silent for a time. Cole, sitting close by, watched the intent look on the doctor's face as he guided the boat along the curving river bank. The shore line grew more rugged; here and there earth and sky melted into a blur. Now and then the lights of a town threw a yellow sheen over the murky water. At intervals the yacht disappeared from view behind a jutting tongue of land, but it was never out of sight for long.

"Doctor," said Cole abruptly, "I don't quite know what to make of you, but we seem to have one interest in common. Both of us are concerned over Miss Brownell. I am partly responsible for whatever happens to her, while you—— But I think you told me that your emotional self is dead."

A queer little chuckle drifted out on the breeze. There was a note of grim despair in it.

"Anyhow," Cole went on, "there is a bond of interest between you and me for the present. Seems we ought to understand each other a little better. The other night, when I trailed the hunchback to your house and later found him asleep on the op-

erating table, your conduct was as mysterious as the deuce. What had happened?"

The doctor, one hand on the tiller, gazed rigidly out over the black water to where the gray blur of a sail was visible against the darkness.

"The thing which we call human intelligence is only a thin veneer," he remarked in whimsical tones. "Sometimes only a slight thrust is needed to break through it. It is very amusing to watch the antics that a supposedly sane being will perform when a crisis of some sort comes along and gives him a jolt. My own part in this affair is an example of what happens when the veneer of intelligence cracks. You would not believe me if I were to tell you, so what is the use?"

"You might try," suggested Cole. The doctor had been a changed man since he learned that Miss Brownell was in danger. Before that he had been all subterfuge, evasions, and bewildering subtleties. Now Cole felt that he was face to face with the man's real self.

"The hunchback came to my house that night to dispatch me to a better world," Latham said.

"He had just performed a similar service for Malcolm Reeves," Cole observed.

"He had orders to get me, too. The gang feared both of us, and they had come to a pass where they couldn't afford to stand on ceremony. Well, that night I heard some one getting in the basement way. That's the advantage of being a light sleeper. I collared the fellow as he came up the stairs. Not knowing what to do with him I gave

him a hypodermic to keep him quiet. Then you came and complicated the situation."

"If the hunchback came to your house to murder you," said Cole doubtfully, "why didn't you turn him over to the police?"

The doctor chuckled softly. "That shows how incongruously we sometimes act, strutting around like hens with their heads chopped off. Your own conduct was very peculiar that night. I was wondering why, instead of handcuffing the culprit to my operating table, you didn't telephone for the police wagon."

"I had a reason."

"And so did I." The doctor chuckled again. "At least I thought I had a sound reason for my conduct. As a matter of fact my reason was at a standstill; no doubt yours was likewise. At any rate I didn't dare hand the fellow over to the police. Certain things had happened that made it undesirable for me to communicate with the authorities."

"The operation on Reeves?" Cole suggested.

Again a queer little laugh drifted out on the wind. Cole suddenly sat erect, gazing hard at the shadowy figure beside him. A shaft of intuition had suddenly pierced the fog of contradictions and incongruities in his mind.

"There were two operations, weren't there?" he asked.

"That's a very shrewd deduction," declared the doctor, raising his voice above the roar of the wind. "There were two. I performed one of them. I strongly suspect that Ballinger performed the other.

The interesting point about them is that there is an official record of the first, but none of the second."

For a moment Cole peered sharply ahead. The yacht was momentarily out of sight, but he caught a glimpse of it again, as they rounded a curve in the river bank.

"Go on," he said. "You were involved with this golden coterie, weren't you?"

"For a time. I thought they were engaged in strictly scientific and legitimate pursuits. I had known Carmody for some time, as a quiet and scholarly man. It was through him I became connected with the group. For a time all went well. My specialized training helped them solve two or three minor technical problems that came up in connection with their experiments.

"Then one evening Carmody telephoned me that an accident had occurred at his house on Bleecker Street. He asked me to come over at once. When I arrived he told me that Malcolm Reeves, who was visiting him that evening, had stumbled and fallen down the stairs. My examination revealed a compound fracture and convinced me that the pressure of the bones against the brain made an immediate operation necessary.

"I had Reeves removed to the nearest hospital. It happened to be one of the smaller private ones. I was assisted by a nurse. She was a little nervous, and I could see that she was new at the game, but at first I thought nothing of it, not until I discovered that there was something wrong with the anæsthetic. She had blundered in administering it. I shudder whenever I think of the result. Perhaps

you can realize something of what it means to have a patient awake in the midst of an operation."

"Did Reeves see you?" asked Cole suddenly.

The tiller wabbled for a moment in Latham's hand. "He not only saw me, but he recognized me. I shall never forget the expression on his face. It was horrible! Well, luckily there were no serious consequences. After a while Reeves was brought under the anæsthetic again, and the operation was successfully finished. In due time he was taken to his home. To this day I don't know whether Carmody told me the truth and the injury was accidental, or whether some one deliberately inflicted it."

"Couldn't you tell from the nature of the wound?"

"Not with any degree of positiveness. I suspect some one tried to murder him that night, but failed. Perhaps the assassin lost his nerve. Carmody didn't dare to have Reeves die on his hands, and so he sent for me. I do know that Reeves had been troublesome toward the last, and that the other members of the gang were afraid of him. They had ample reason for wishing him out of the way, or at least rendered harmless."

"And so they performed a second operation that destroyed his memory?" guessed Cole.

"Presumably, but that's only a surmise on my part. Reeves recuperated very rapidly after the first operation. One evening, shortly after he became able to move about, he started out on a mysterious errand. He never returned, and the police found no trace of him. About the same time I

began to grow suspicious in regard to the activities of the gang. I had no tangible proof, but it was my strong impression that their aims were not strictly legitimate."

"Isn't anybody entitled to make all the gold he wants to, if he's lucky enough to know how?"

"That's just the point. Carmody assured me he had discovered a process whereby real gold could be produced synthetically. It would not only look like gold, he told me, but it would assay up to the required standard when turned over to the government mints. Carmody put it so convincingly that at the time I believed him, especially when he showed me samples. Later I began to have grave suspicions. Certain things led me to doubt that the gang had sufficient faith in its products to turn it over to the government in the form of bullion. In short, I had reason to believe that I was involved in a huge counterfeiting project."

"What!" exclaimed Cole. The doctor's revelation went beyond what he had learned from The Unknown Seven.

"To eliminate all risk the gang decided to take a short cut," Latham went on. "Instead of taking the gold to Uncle Sam's mint they set up a mint of their own. In a short time the country will be flooded with spurious gold coins that are practically indistinguishable from the real."

"And you have kept silent all this time?"

"What did I tell you about the fragile quality of our veneer of intelligence? I went to Carmody's house and told him of my suspicions. The old fox said nothing for a time, but merely smiled that

freezing smile of his. Then he took me to a small room on the second floor. There sat Reeves, a gibbering maniac. Carmody bluntly accused me of having performed the operation that deprived him of his reason and smoothly suggested that it might be well for me to keep my suspicions to myself.

"Carmody went on talking, mentioning among other things that it was on record that I had performed an operation on Reeves' skull. Call me a simpleton if you like, but the professor's words sank in. I guessed that a second operation had been performed under cover of the original one, but I had no means of proving it. I could see nothing but ruin and disaster ahead. The only one who had witnessed my operation was the nurse, and I could expect no help from her. I argued and argued with myself, but, in the end, I decided to say nothing, at least for a time. Sooner or later I suppose I should have spoken, but just then I played the coward's part. I was very neatly caught. In what was left of Reeves' mind was a picture of myself, as he had seen me when he woke up in the midst of the operation. Occasionally, when the recollection came back to him, he would shriek my name. The second operation, on the other hand, had been performed under circumstances so deftly arranged that they had left no impression whatever. There, my friend, you have the whole story. Sounds like a travesty, eh? I shan't feel at all hurt if you refuse to believe me."

Cole had no reason to doubt him. What Latham had told him coincided at various points of contact with what he had learned at the headquarters of The

Unknown Seven. He could piece out the rest. Agents of The Unknown Seven had kidnaped Reeves from the Carmody residence and taken him to headquarters. There he had been placed under Doctor Ballinger's care, and Ballinger had gone through with the pretense of trying to restore Reeves' mental functions. Only one contradiction remained. Since Reeves was in the hands of a physician who was friendly to the gang and could be depended upon to destroy any symptoms of returning sanity in Reeves, why had it been thought necessary to kill him? Ballinger himself evidently shrank from such a coarse crime as murder. He must have had several chances to kill Reeves by safe and subtle means, and yet the hunchback had been commissioned to do the crime. Why had Reeves been killed?

For a while the answer to that question eluded Cole. Then he recalled something Carlin had told him. After Reeves had been under Ballinger's care for a time, without showing any signs of improvement, it had been suggested that he should be removed to a hospital and a consulting physician called in. Evidently Ballinger had seen a danger to himself in that suggestion, and so the murder had been decided upon.

"I have no reason to doubt you," Cole said. "I don't know but what I would have acted pretty much the same if I had been in your place. I think, though, that you have done a lot of needless worrying. Ballinger is not at all confident of being able to fasten the second operation on you."

"How is that?" asked Latham quickly.

"I can't tell you, but I have every reason to believe that Ballinger is afrad of what an autopsy on the body might show. Not being a scientific man I can't grasp the details. All I know is that Latham is so anxious to prevent an autopsy that he is having the body spirited away."

Latham's hand left the tiller, and the boat lurched dangerously. In a moment he had regained control of it.

"Unless I am a very poor guesser," Cole went on, "the body is on the yacht ahead of us. They are taking it to a place where it can be safely destroyed. It's hard to do such things in the city."

Latham stared at him speechlessly through the dusk. The wind had increased, and the waves were swishing and churning against the bow of the little craft.

"It may be Ballinger is suffering from an uneasy conscience," the doctor murmured. "That's one of the things that happen when the veneer of intelligence cracks. Conscience makes a man do queer things. However, if your guess is right——"

He stopped short, at the same time peering sharply ahead. Suddenly his hand went out, and the chugging of the motor ceased.

"The chase is over," he said.

Cole followed his glance. The yacht, with sails lowered, was turning into a small inlet.

"And here is where the excitement begins," he declared.

CHAPTER XXI

THE FACE AT THE WINDOW

WHILE Doctor Latham fastened the boat, Cole's eyes swept the black masses of wooded hills that slanted upward at a sharp angle from the river bank. At the apex of the tallest peak a light gleamed, but otherwise there was no sign of human habitation on this side of the river. The lights of a town twinkled across the foaming welter of waves, and they helped Cole to fix their location. They were in one of the wildest and most rugged sections of Dutchess County. The peak, on which the solitary light shone, had once been a popular pleasure resort, and in the old days a cable railway had carried week-end excursionists to the top. Of late, what with the dry era and the public's fickle fancy, the place had lost its popularity, and the buildings on the peak were falling into decay. The ruggedly romantic setting seemed an ideal one for the kind of adventure Cole anticipated.

With the doctor at his heels, he moved cautiously toward the point where the yacht had anchored a short distance ahead. Of a sudden they stopped. The crack of a pistol rose sharply above the whine of the wind.

"Only a signal, I think," said Cole, after waiting tensely for a few moments.

They advanced a little farther, then stopped on a slight elevation from which they had an unob-

structed view of the yacht. In the lights from the craft they saw a number of men going ashore, and several of them were carrying a bulky object. Their faces were not recognizable at that distance, but Cole thought there were about a dozen in all.

"We may have quite a lively tussle," he observed in an undertone. "I could have brought a few helpers along, but safety doesn't always lie in numbers."

"I like this better," said Latham. "If there were more of us there might not be enough thrills to go around. Where are we?"

"That place, up there in the clouds, where you see the light, is called Dutchess Point. I believe there is a car coming down. That's probably what the pistol shot meant."

A light was treading its way in a zigzagging course down the side of the hill. Soon were heard the chugging of motors and the metallic snarl of brakes. The two men waited until the car reached the group that had come off the yacht. As soon as the loaded vehicle started to retread its path up the hill they followed. It proved a hard climb, and they reached the top a full half hour behind the car.

The apex was composed mostly of huge flat rock, with here and there a few scrawny trees. There were half a dozen buildings scattered about, and in the largest one several lights had appeared by the time the two climbers reached the top. They stood in a dark spot behind a little cluster of starving hemlocks. No one was in sight, but the sound of voices drifted out to them through the open windows of the large building.

"Hear that noise?" whispered Latham. "What do you suppose it is?"

Cole listened. A gentle, rhythmic whirring was heard. He looked down at his feet, for it seemed to come from underground.

"Machinery," he said, and suddenly he remembered the words spoken by Malcolm Reeves in his insane glee: "Yellow—pretty yellow." The whirring noise that he heard, as he stood there under the hemlocks, brought them back to his mind.

"Look!" said Latham suddenly.

Cole, following his pointing finger, glanced upward. The large building, he now noticed, was equipped with a high tower, and near its top a light had appeared in the last few moments. At the lighted window a face was dimly discernible. Cole strained his eyes at the point of illumination, and suddenly he gripped his companion's arm.

"It's a woman, Latham!"

The doctor gasped. "It must be Miss Brownell, then!"

The two men continued staring upward. Their imaginations touched up the dim and remote picture which they saw with their eyes. The face was very white, thought Cole, and the eyes held a look of terror. She was looking downward; their glances met somewhere in mid-air, and yet she appeared not to see the two watchers below.

"What shall we do?" asked Latham.

"You stay here," said Cole. "I'm going to look around a bit."

He slipped away among the trees, avoiding the open space in front of the building. The tower

was in the rear, overlooking the steep incline, and he moved in that direction. He looked up a sheer wall to where the light shone. To climb up there was out of the question, for the blank wall offered no hold for either hands or feet. He moved cautiously toward the front entrance. For a moment he listened outside the sagging door, then boldly pushed it open and entered.

He was in a dark corridor. Under one of the doors at the side was a thin wedge of light. A number of voices issued from it; evidently a conference of some kind was in progress. Knowing that the stairway leading to the tower must be in that direction, Cole tiptoed farther down the hall. A bold and reckless move, he had learned from experience, was often more effective than a thought-out plan. Before he could do anything else Miss Brownell must be rescued. His hands were tied, as long as she was held as a hostage by the gang. Once she was out of harm's way he could proceed against them as ruthlessly as he pleased.

He came to the end of the hall, and there he brought up against another door. He opened it, almost sure that it must lead to the stairs, but instead he found himself in a large, square room. A small electric bulb glowed in the ceiling, and in its light he caught a glimpse of a forbidding figure guarding a door at the farther side. The sentinel was thick-set and broad-shouldered. His bushy brows seemed top-heavy for his very small eyes which glared out at Cole in a startled way.

"Stop right where you are!" he commanded, at the same instant reaching for his hip pocket. As

his fingers closed around the handle of an automatic, Cole lunged forward. His fist landed with explosive force in the man's face, and he fell to the ground without a sound.

"Sorry, old top, but it had to be done," Cole told the insensible man, as he opened the door which the fellow had been guarding. Before him was a winding stairway that seemed to extend upward interminably. Very quickly Cole lifted the man through the door and stretched him out along the steps, then drew the door to.

He hurried up the stairs. The long ascent would have exhausted a weaker man, but Cole's lungs and muscles were in the pink of condition. At length, panting a little, he reached the top. Before him was a door. He rapped, and footfalls crossed the floor within.

"Who's there?" demanded a voice which he recognized as Miss Brownell's. It sounded a bit lofty, pathetically so, he thought.

"Cole," he replied.

"Oh!" The exclamation was more a sigh of relief. "But I can't let you in. The door is locked, and I have no key."

"I might have known it," muttered Cole. The space between the door and the wall of the tower was very narrow. Bracing his back against the wall he placed his feet on the door and shoved steadily. It was of stout material, but at length it gave with an abruptness that precipitated him to the floor. Quickly he picked himself up.

The girl rushed toward him. There was an

excited flush which surmounted the white of her face. "I am so glad——" she began.

"You were foolish," Cole sternly interrupted. "You shouldn't have started after Ballinger alone. That's no job for a woman. What happened?"

"Ballinger was too clever for me," she confessed. "The moment I thought I had him I was shoved into a car, blindfolded, and—— Well, that's about all I know. When I opened my eyes the next morning I found myself here."

"How have they treated you?"

"Oh, very well, suspiciously well. I have been told that prisoners who are doomed to die always get the best of everything. Mr. Cole, you have thrown a full-sized scare into the gang. I heard a couple of the men talking outside my door this morning. I suppose they felt sure I would never have a chance to repeat what I heard. They said——"

"Not so loud!" admonished Cole.

"I gathered from what they said," she went on in a whisper, "that the leaders of the gang are badly frightened. They seem to think you are hot on their trail."

"They're mistaken," declared Cole modestly. "I've barely got started as yet."

"Well, all the same they are very much worried. Their plan, as one of the men put it, is to make a swift clean-up and a quick get-away. Some one, whom they called 'the big chief,' was to come out here to-night."

"About a dozen men arrived a little while ago,"

Cole informed her. "No doubt the chief was among them. Do you know who he is?"

"No. He wasn't referred to by name in the conversation which I overheard. I am sure, though, that Doctor Latham isn't the man. In fact I never really thought so. More of my woman's intuition, I suppose."

"What else did the men say?" he asked in a whisper

"They said there is about half a billion dollars' worth of gold ready to be minted. I didn't quite understand what they meant by that. There is a complete set of machinery hidden somewhere about the place, and it is running at full capacity."

"I should think the comings and goings of the gang would excite the curiosity of the townspeople across the river."

"Oh, they've managed that part very cleverly by circulating a report to the effect that the buildings are being renovated and that Dutchess Point is to be reopened as a pleasure resort next spring. In fact, they have put a crew of carpenters, road-makers and gardeners to work on the place. Just for a blind, of course. It seems they haven't neglected a single precaution. Yet they seem to be worried over something."

"Excellent! When your enemy is worried, you have an advantage over him. What seems to be the trouble?"

"I couldn't quite make out. All I heard was a few scattered remarks. It appears they are having some difficulty with the gold-making process. There seems to be a minor flaw in the product,

due to the absence of something which they refer as the seventh ingredient. I haven't the least idea what is is, but it seems to be related to the experimental work Doctor Latham conducted before he severed his connection with the gang. They appear to think that he could solve their difficulty if he was so inclined."

"By supplying the formula for the seventh ingredient?"

"Something like that. Anyway, that was the impression I received. Evidently the missing ingredient isn't of very great importance, but they want to make the product as perfect as possible."

"For the sake of safety in minting and circulating it, I suppose," said Cole thoughtfully. "Apparently Latham left them at an inopportune time from their point of view. Doubtless they would exert any manner of pressure on him in order to make him divulge the secret of this so-called seventh ingredient."

"I doubt if they would succeed."

"So do I," said Cole, looking curiously at the girl. "Latham is a fighter clean through, and he is a match for them. By the way, he came out with me this evening."

She caught her breath and fixed her wide, troubled eyes on his face.

"Doctor Latham here?" she murmured. "Did he volunteer to come with you?"

"I invited him to come, and he jumped at the invitation. I foresaw that he would prove useful, and he was doubly anxious to come when I hinted that our expedition to-night might reveal your

whereabouts. Your disappearance came as a great shock to him."

"Then you no longer think he is implicated with these scoundrels?"

"No, I don't. He was with them until he saw that their aims were crooked, and then he got out as best he could. Latham has acted foolishly, but that's all. The scientific side of these experiments appealed to the scholar in him. I don't think he was ever moved by greed. No, Latham wasn't to be blamed. Whenever a man is in love he is apt to make a fool of himself."

She lowered her eyes. "Doctor Latham is a good man," she said tensely. "I wish I could——" A gentle sigh escaped her.

"I understand," murmured Cole. "Life is a bit of a tangle, isn't it? Even the logical mind of a scholar isn't able to steer clear of the meshes when a charming woman is involved. One never knows——"

He paused, threw a quick glance at the door, then looked at Miss Brownell, noting the tensity that had suddenly crept into her face. In an instant his automatic was in his hand, and he tiptoed softly to the door. Holding it open a crack, he heard unmistakably the sounds of footsteps coming up the stairs.

"Stand back!" he ordered curtly. "Some one's coming!"

But the girl, smiling faintly, signified with a shrug that she intended to remain where she was.

CHAPTER XXII

A DUEL OF WITS

COLE opened the door a trifle wider. The footfalls, furtive and hesitant, sounded as if several men were coming up the protesting stairs. He fancied there were many others below who were ready to jump into the fight if he should be successful in disposing of the ones now approaching. His mind worked with lightning speed as he turned away from the door.

The room, hexagonal in shape, with a tall window at each angle, was lighted from a tarnished brass fixture at one side. While watching the light from the outside, Cole had noticed that from the windows to the ground was a sheer drop of one hundred and fifty feet, so escape in that direction was impossible. The walls, covered with once gaudy paper that was now faded and torn, seemed to offer no loophole. The unswept floor was cluttered with pieces of dilapidated furniture of a kind which suggested that the room had once served as a rendezvous for gamblers. The single door was the only exit, and flight in that direction was cut off by the men now creeping up the stairs. As nearly as Cole could determine from the sounds, they were as yet only halfway up. For an instant his thoughts flew to Doctor Latham, and he wondered if the physician was still waiting for him outside.

He stepped quickly toward the girl. "Talk," he whispered, "talk about anything."

She took her cue with a comprehending nod, and Cole hastened back to the door.

"But I don't know, so how can I tell you?" she asked in a tone whose naturalness instantly won his approval. He was quick to follow up her lead.

"You have no idea who the leader of these cutthroats is?" he asked in a slightly nettled tone.

"None whatever."

He listened for a moment. The footsteps were coming gradually closer. When he spoke again, he threw his voice so that it sounded as if coming from the center of the room, a ventriloquial trick he had practiced when a boy and often found useful.

"You have been here a good many hours," he pointed out. "I thought you might have overheard something that gave you a clew."

"You forget that I have been locked up in this room all the time."

"That's so," Cole admitted, tightening his grip on his automatic. The footfalls on the stairs had ceased. Evidently the persons who were approaching had stopped to listen to the conversation. "You haven't seen any one who looks as if he might be the boss of the outfit?"

"No one," she declared convincingly. "So far I have come in contact only with underlings. The man higher up, whoever he is, has remained in the background. Of course, I could make a guess."

"Let's hear it."

"Doctor Latham."

Cole smiled. It was an excellent bit of strategy, and he was confident that the men below had heard.

Her cleverly simulated suspicion in regard to the physician was well calculated to deceive them in regard to the extent and accuracy of her information.

"You may be right," he said thoughtfully just as the footsteps began to move upward again, and once more his voice sounded as if coming from the interior of the room. "I've had my eyes on the doctor myself. He is a sly bird, but I'm not sure that his cranium is the adequate size for a job of this kind. However he will bear watching. But we're wasting time. The first thing to do is to get you safely out of this nest of crooks. I think the way is clear, but we must——"

"You're a little bit slow," said a voice, and the door came open, admitting a stocky individual with a leveled automatic. He came straight forward, stopping bewilderedly as he saw only the girl, and in that instant Cole reached out behind him, seized him firmly by the neck and, swinging him backward with a powerful sweep, slammed his head against the wall. With a fragmentary cry the man went lurching to the floor, and in almost the same instant Cole whirled round and struck his companion a vigorous blow with the butt of his pistol. The fellow dropped like a dead-weight.

"Two of them!" exclaimed Cole, feeling quite elated at the success of his ruse. "Where's the third?"

Miss Brownell, breathing rapidly, looked hard at the door. Cole glanced out, but there was neither sign nor sound of movement on the stairs.

"I thought there were several of them," he mut-

tered. "Must have been mistaken. Sounds are deceptive, you know. This may come in handy."

He stooped, picked up the weapon dropped by his second adversary, and handed it to Miss Brownell. With an expert air she examined the mechanism, making sure it was loaded.

"You worked the trick to the queen's taste, Miss Brownell," he declared approvingly. "It was a good piece of work."

"But you did it all."

"Far from it! I couldn't have thrown them off their guard if you hadn't helped. Do you know," peering at her curiously, "I was afraid you would faint, or something like that."

She laughed. "You haven't a very high opinion of our sex, Mr. Cole."

"It is rising every moment. We must get away before these rascals come to. Feel strong enough for a walk?"

"Just try me! Your exhibition of fisticuffs was so stimulating that I am ready for anything."

"Then let's start. Latham must be wondering what has become of me." With a glance at his fallen foes, Cole started down the stairs, the girl following. He did not wish to alarm her by voicing his misgivings, but he was far from certain that they would reach the bottom without an interruption. Doubtless the others must be aware by this time that something was amiss. The burly sentinel he had knocked down at the foot of the stairs had probably either recovered consciousness or been found by his accomplices. In either event, their path was beset by perils.

Pistol in one hand, Cole proceeded cautiously down the stairs. They were dark, and the constant winding made progress difficult. He had discovered that Miss Brownell was brave and resourceful, but he would breathe more easily when he had got her out of harm's way.

They reached another turn, and suddenly the girl stumbled and lurched violently against him.

"Ouch!" she moaned, trying to repress an exclamation of pain. "My ankle! I think I twisted it."

Cole cursed softly as he gathered her in his arms. Her figure was writhing in the throes of physical distress.

"As I told you once before," she complained mockingly, trying to make light of the injury, "you are not at all gallant. Almost any other man would have welcomed the chance."

Cole muttered something under his breath. A dislocated ankle complicated a situation that was already critical enough, but the girl's superb behavior stirred him to unwilling admiration. His fears were all for her, not for himself. He was almost at the foot of the stairs now. If he could only get her safely out of the building and place her in Doctor Latham's care. If only——

Abruptly he stopped before a door. With his burden in his arms he had reached the foot of the stairs. For a moment he stopped and listened, but all seemed quiet on the other side. An involuntary moan of pain told that Miss Brownell was suffering intensely. Balancing her on his shoulder he reached out a hand and pushed the door open.

Instantly he felt a premonition that something was wrong. The sentry, whom he had left unconscious at the door before ascending to the tower, was no longer there. He started to draw back, but it was too late. A shadow leaped swiftly across the path of light in front of the open door. A hand clutching a bludgeon was raised to strike. Cole, with the girl on his shoulder, could not dodge the blow. It caught him squarely on the jaw, and the terrific impact sent him reeling against the stairs. The girl slipped away from him, and in his last conscious moment he tried to ease her fall.

"I take it all back," she whispered in his ear, her bantering tone edged with pain and anguish. "You—you *are* gallant, Mr. Cole."

But Cole heard nothing.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE SEVENTH INGREDIENT

WHEN, some thirty or forty minutes later, Cole opened his eyes and fingered his swollen jaw, he found himself sprawling in a chair in a strange room. In front of him stood Doctor Latham, a humorously sympathetic look on his face.

The room, with its faded tawdriness and crumbling decorations, looked as if it had once been a private dining room. The scratched woodwork and the liquid stains on the wall paper were reminiscent of hilarious times. Cole noticed that the two windows were shuttered on the outside.

"How do you feel?" inquired the physician.

"As if I was all jaw," said Cole, opening his eyes a little wider and gazing stupidly at the doctor. It took him several minutes to recall that he was still in the big house on Dutchess Point. A rhythmic vibration that seemed to come from beneath the floor, accompanied by the remote humming of machinery, brought him back to the present.

"Why are you here?" he demanded of the physician. "Didn't I tell you to stay outside?"

"So you did, and it was excellent advice, my friend. I wish now I had heeded it. But I grew impatient and proceeded to find out what had become of you. All I got for my pains was an ungentle tap in the region of the occipital bone."

With a serio-comic expression the doctor caressed

the back of his head. His clothing was rumpled and looked as if he had been dragged over a dusty floor.

Again Cole stroked his jaw. "Where is Miss Brownell?" he suddenly asked.

Latham pointed across the room where, white-faced but smiling, the girl sat in a chair.

"I've justified my existence at last," he remarked. "I managed to straighten out Miss Brownell's ankle. Didn't have my kit with me, and I fear I dealt rather roughly with her. How about it, Miss Brownell?"

"I hardly felt it," she assured him. "For a big man, you are gentleness itself."

The physician looked long into her smiling face, and when he turned away there was a sad, wistful expression in his eyes. Miss Brownell caught a fleeting glimpse of it, and her face sobered instantly.

"Cheerful place!" murmured Latham, glancing up at the dilapidated ceiling. "Anyway, we ought to be thankful that the three of us are together. Wonder what the amiable ruffians plan to do next. What happened to you after you left me, Cole?"

It took Cole some little time to remember, but at length he gave the doctor a brief summary of the episode in the tower, ending with the unexpected attack that had left him with a swollen jaw. The doctor seemed amused.

"Laid them both out, eh?" he said with a chuckle. "Good work, Cole. I believe you could manage a massacre all by yourself if you had the chance."

"The chance may come sooner than we think," said Cole dryly, with a glance at the door. "Miss

Brownell told me some of the things she has learned during her term of imprisonment here. It seems we have one advantage, doctor."

"What's that?"

"The seventh ingredient."

A thin smile parted the physician's lips. "That's so. I'd forgotten about that. It's a minor detail I worked out independently. Professor Carmody made several attempts to make me reveal the secret of it, but I refused. You see, by that time I had discovered that the scheme was crooked, and I would have nothing more to do with the gang. However, the seventh ingredient, as they call it, isn't of great importance. Its value is almost nil."

"But they seem to think otherwise."

"They are mistaken, and naturally so. I was mistaken myself for a while. I exaggerated the importance of the so-called seventh ingredient. Afterward, when I knew better, I saw no reason why I should put them right."

"Glad you didn't, Latham. As long as they are laboring under a misapprehension, we have an advantage over them."

"How is that?"

"They think you have something that they want. The fact that they are mistaken makes no difference. As matters stand at present, you are in a position to bargain with them."

"Bargain over what?"

"Oh, several things." Cole stepped a little closer to him and spoke in an undertone. "Miss Brownell's safety, for instance."

Latham's brows went up. "Of course!" he mur-

mured. "I'm a bit dull to-night. Glad you have your thinking cap on, Cole. The amiable ruffians will be given to understand that I refuse to discuss the seventh ingredient until Miss Brownell is at a safe distance. After that nothing will matter. Smoke?"

Cole helped himself to a cigarette from the physician's case, slanting a quick glance in the girl's direction as he lighted it. She looked both puzzled and amused.

"Were you saying something I was not supposed to hear?" she inquired.

The question remained unanswered, for just then the door opened, and the gaunt, frock-coated figure of Professor Carmody strutted into the room. In his hand was an automatic, which he managed very cautiously, and his shrunken face was all smiles.

"Hello, Cole," he chirped gleefully. "Good evening, Miss Brownell. How are you, doctor? Glad to see you all here." He chuckled wheezily and rubbed his bony hands with their talonlike fingers. "Too bad you didn't follow my advice the other day, Latham. You would have escaped a lot of trouble if you had been sensible."

"Go to blazes," said the doctor contemptuously, advancing a step toward Carmody.

The pistol came upward in the professor's hand. "Don't move," he warned. "And it won't do either of you any good to reach for your weapons. They were removed while you were—ahem—incapacitated. We object to rowdyism in this place. Our leader is a peaceful man and does not like disturbances. Cole, you have caused us a lot of embar-

rassment, and see what it has led you to. I believe our last meeting took place in room 2512, the Security Building."

Cole made a wry face as he recalled how the professor had tricked him. "You were a bit too clever for me that time, Carmody," he admitted.

The professor gave a cackling, complacent laugh. "Even an old man like me must have his little jokes," he remarked, still adhering to his ludicrous habit of raising and dropping his voice on almost every other word. "I'll wager you don't know even now what my object was. Eh, Cole?"

Cole measured him with a cool glance. "I think I do," he declared quietly. "The body of Reeves was in the safe. Members of your illustrious gang had removed it from its former place and put it there. One of my men learned what the safe contained, and he paid with his life for his discovery. Later you dropped in to see that everything was in readiness to sneak the safe and its contents out of town."

"You are a very shrewd guesser, Mr. Cole. It is a matter of keen regret to me that one of such fine intellect must be on the wrong side of this situation. As for the body of Reeves, it will very soon be reduced to a handful of fine dust. The process will be scientific in every respect. Nothing coarse or gruesome, you understand. We couldn't have disposed of it satisfactorily in the city. It would have been too dangerous. But that isn't what I came in here to talk about. Doctor Latham, you were once a friend of mine, and in the beginning of this enterprise you gave us several valuable hints.

For the last time I ask you to be reasonable. It is your last chance."

"And if I refuse?"

The professor screwed his face into a melancholy expression. "In that event you, too, will soon be only a handful of dust."

"Even so I will have the advantage over you, professor. When your end comes there won't be enough dust to make a thimbleful. I hope I make my meaning clear?"

"You will not reconsider your decision?"

"No!" declared Latham explosively.

"Not even in order to save the life of this charming young lady?" Carmody turned his beatifically smiling face toward Miss Brownell.

A pallor crept up under the doctor's eyes. He stared with a horrified expression at the professor.

"You mean that——"

"Precisely, my dear doctor. The young lady is dangerous to us. Under the circumstances the law of self-preservation demands that she be rendered harmless, and the only effective way of doing that is to remove her from this sad world. However, in appreciation of the services you once rendered us, she shall be spared if you will reconsider your decision."

The doctor appeared to hesitate. His eyes, full of tenderness, were fixed on Miss Brownell. Cole could see that he pretended to be wavering. Then the girl spoke.

"Doctor Latham has decided," she declared in a clear, calm voice. "He is not the type of man who bargains with blackguards. I wouldn't permit

it, even if he were so inclined. Go away!" she added, turning her eyes, full of cold contempt, on the professor.

Carmody winced beneath her scornful gaze. For a moment he plucked nervously at the lapel of his coat. Then, with a soft chuckle that sounded diabolical to the other three in the room, he turned to the doctor.

"The young lady had spoken," he remarked. "I'm afraid her pretty head is full of silly notions. Youth is always like that. You are older and wiser, Latham. What do you say?"

The doctor regarded him calculatingly. "Just what do you want, Carmody?"

"Ah, that's better! Getting down to terms, eh? I see I was not mistaken in relying on your common sense. You know what I want, doctor. It is something we have discussed before. Miss Brownell and Mr. Cole will not understand what I mean, but it has something to do with the seventh ingredient."

Latham nodded. "Thought so. Very curious on that point, aren't you, professor? I used all my spare time during three or four months working out that interesting angle. It was quite fascinating, I assure you. Do you know, professor, I sometimes wonder if the late lamented Doctor Price was not about two hundred years ahead of his time? From the very beginning of our experiments I suspected that Doctor Price's secret—the secret which he never divulged—was a sort of electronic reaction applied to chemical compounds. When I

learned how to use that reaction in the process we had under way, my problem was solved."

Carmody regarded him narrowly. "The electron wasn't known in Doctor Price's day."

"And that's why I say he was about two centuries ahead of his time. At any rate, I am satisfied he stumbled upon something which closely resembles our modern discoveries. Nothing else explains the marvelous achievement that he took with him to his grave."

"And you claim to have resurrected his discovery, Latham?"

"I am not in the habit of making claims," said the doctor modestly, with an air of mysteriousness that was well calculated to impress Carmody. "I prefer to let facts speak for themselves."

Carmody pondered, his sharp, greedy little eyes wandering from one face in the group to another.

"You made memoranda of your experiments, of course?"

"Naturally."

"Where are your notes?"

Latham smiled blandly. "In two places. Here," tapping his head, "I carry the whole process. My written memoranda are in a safe place, a place which I shan't divulge to you until you have given us reasonable guarantees in regard to our safety."

Professor Carmody scowled. "You are hardly in a position to dictate terms."

"Do as you like," said Latham with a shrug. "If you reject my conditions, I shall follow Doctor Price's example and take my little secret with me to my grave."

"And what about Miss Brownell?"

The physician winced, but before he could answer the girl spoke for herself.

"Don't mind me," she said spiritedly. "Doctor Latham, why don't you tell the professor that he is beneath contempt?"

Carmody turned his head and regarded her with a look of lofty disdain. "Haughty little devil!" he muttered under his breath, then faced the physician again. "Well, Latham, what would you call reasonable guarantees?"

"Cole and myself will remain here for the present. As far as Miss Brownell is concerned, I'll be satisfied when she telephones me from her home in town that she has arrived there safely. Does that strike you as reasonable, Cole?"

"Perfectly."

Carmody scratched his jaw perplexedly. "It is a very difficult situation. I shall refer it to the leader of our organization."

With that he backed cautiously toward the door, his automatic gripped tightly in his thin, gnarled hand. In a moment the door closed behind him, then came the sound of a heavy bolt turning in the lock, and the two men and the girl were alone.

CHAPTER XXIV

CORNERED

COLE turned to the window and verified his impression that the shutters were strong enough to bar their exit in that direction. For a few moments he stood there, listening to the remote booming of the waves, the fretful whine of the wind, the creaking and groaning of timbers in the old house. With these sounds there mingled another, a faint but ecstatic humming and whirring that seemed to come from some subterranean crypt.

"Gold!" it seemed to say with a dull, sinister intonation. "Gold!"

Cole shrugged and moved away. Next he hurled himself against the door, but its solid resistance told him the effort was useless. The doctor stood in the middle of the room, pulling thoughtfully at his black beard and now and then sending Miss Brownell a glance out of his strange, flashing eyes.

"You handled the professor superbly," Cole told him. "He is guessing now, and when a man is guessing he is at a distinct disadvantage."

The doctor smiled musingly. "But don't build too high hopes on his state of mind," he cautioned. "It is best not to underrate the enemy's resources."

"What about that choice morsel you handed him in regard to an electronic reaction?" Cole wanted to know. "Anything in it?"

"Absolutely nothing. But it sounded impressive enough to give the professor something to worry

about. As for Doctor Price, he wouldn't have recognized an electron if he had seen one with the naked eye. I hardly expected Carmody to swallow it, but he did. When you tell a fib, it is always best to tell the kind that the other fellow is prepared to believe."

Cole laughed; there was something irresistible about the doctor's stoicism. "I hope," he fervently declared, "that the swallowing of that electron will give the professor a severe attack of cramps. What do you propose to do next, Latham?"

"Heroics were never in my line," the doctor asserted in a tone that was meant to be cynical. "When one is caught, the thing to do is to yield as gracefully as possible. I suggest we surrender to the enemy. Why stand on pride when one is headed for a tumble?"

"In other words, you mean to build up a magnificent bluff on the electron Carmody swallowed?"

"Precisely," said Latham, casting a sidelong glance at Miss Brownell.

The girl got up, limped uncertainly across the floor, and placed a hand on the physician's arm.

"You are a good man, Doctor Latham," she murmured. "You are quite transparent, however. You intend to keep up this bluff, as you call it, until I am at a safe distance. You fail to consider what is going to happen to you and Mr. Cole when they discover you have tricked them."

"Oh, we will cross that bridge when we come to it," said Latham with an air of profound assurance.

"You aren't candid with me," the girl protested. "You know they will kill you both as soon as they

realize they have been imposed upon. You intend to sacrifice yourself for my sake. I won't have it!"

"Now, Miss Brownell——"

"I won't accept such a sacrifice," she declared vehemently. "That's absolutely final."

Latham gazed at her in an embarrassed way. He tried to smile, but it was a pathetic effort. "Youth is always that way," he declared. "Always butting its head against stone walls. Don't you see, Miss Brownell, that——"

"No, I don't," she interrupted. "And, so you won't be tempted to give it for my sake, let me tell you that I intend to fight this crowd of cowardly ruffians till the end. Even if you should surrender, I would not, so your sacrifice would be in vain."

Latham stroked his beard reflectively. A flippant remark was on the tip of his tongue, but he seemed unable to utter it. He assisted the girl back to her chair.

Cole had watched them in silence. Something stirred gently within him as he witnessed the scene between the doctor and the girl. There was a touch of the sublime in the physician's determination to sacrifice himself for the object of his hopeless devotion. But to Cole it all seemed very futile. He doubted strongly that the leader of the gang would accept Latham's terms. Knowing that she had discovered several important things in regard to the organization's activities, they would not be likely to let the girl out of their clutches. Their logical move would be an effort to obtain by other means the secret which they supposed was in Latham's

position. Nevertheless, the little drama enacted before his eyes touched him deeply. Now he shrugged off his hopeless feeling and strode briskly across the floor.

"It isn't time to sing the funeral hymn just yet," he declared. "There is another fight in us still. I propose that we——"

What he had to propose was not made clear, for the door opened, and with his usual stiff and dignified gait Professor Carmody walked once more into the room. He had dropped his mock affability and carried himself with a stern and dignified air.

"I have talked with the chief," he announced, addressing Doctor Latham. "The arrangement you suggested is flatly impossible."

"Just as I thought," muttered Cole under his breath.

"You can see for yourself how unreasonable it is," Carmody went on in an argumentative tone. "Miss Brownell is in possession of information which, if used against us, might harm us greatly. Under the circumstances it would be extreme folly on our part to permit her to leave this place for the present."

"Then what do you propose?" asked the doctor.

"That you listen to reason. In a few days, a week or two at most, our present enterprise will be finished, and we shall be in a position where nothing can hurt us. You, Latham, can hasten developments, if you wish, by giving us the formula you have worked out. It isn't essential, but we prefer to make use of it. The sooner you choose to oblige

us, the sooner you and your friends will be permitted to depart."

The doctor regarded him with a half-humorous, half-contemptuous gaze. "Is that all?"

"By no means. If you decide to accommodate us, you shall share in the golden harvest we soon expect to reap. Think of it, Latham. By complying with a simple request you will make yourself enormously wealthy. Never before in the world's history was such a magnificent reward offered for a comparatively small service. Never since——"

"You are waxing rhapsodical, professor," interrupted Latham curtly. "I am always suspicious of a man who makes flowery promises. Will you tell me in plain words—the plainer the better—what will happen if I should reject your magnanimous offer?"

"I do not like to contemplate it," said Carmody, his face full of sadness. "Especially in view of Miss Brownell's connection with the matter. But you will not do anything so foolish, Latham. Remember that we are powerful enough to get what we want, and that we do not hesitate to use extreme measures when necessary. We can bend even such a stubborn will as yours. I am waiting for your answer. Will you give us the formula voluntarily, or must we resort to unpleasant forms of coercion?"

Maintaining a firm hold on his pistol, he struck an expectant attitude. Cole, who had remained a silent but attentive listener, could see that Latham's position in the scientific world, together with the work he had previously done for the organization,

had convinced the professor that he really possessed a formula that would be of great value to the gang. Latham, on the other hand, seemed in a quandary as to how he might best use his precarious advantage. Already it was slipping away from him, and soon, unless an unforeseen development came to his rescue, it might be turned against him.

"You are taking a long time," complained the professor.

"It is a weighty question," rejoined Latham.

"Perhaps I can help you to arrive at a decision," said Carmody, a faint, cruel smile parting his bloodless lips. Suddenly he shifted the aim of the pistol so that the barrel pointed straight to Miss Brownell. "I believe you are a man of your word, Latham. I shall count ten. Unless you give me a favorable reply before I reach ten, Miss Brownell will go to a better world."

The sardonic grin that had twisted the doctor's lips froze into a ghastly look of horror. Miss Brownell straightened a little in her chair, her face turned a shade paler, but there was no fear in the eyes he leveled at the professor. Critical as the moment was, Cole's dominant sensation was admiration for her courage.

Carmody began to count in his thin, brassy voice: "One—two—three—four——"

Cole gazed narrowly into his face, as impassive as if carved out of wood. There seemed to be no doubt but what Carmody meant to carry out his monstrous threat. He flexed his muscles for a spring while the professor went on counting.

"——five—six—seven—eight——"

Cole lunged forward, staking everything on the chance of snatching the murderous weapon from the professor's hand, but Doctor Latham acted even more quickly. With a sudden bound he crossed the floor and placed himself directly in front of the chair in which the girl sat. For a moment the pistol pointed straight at his midriff; then, with an exclamation of baffled rage, Carmody lowered the weapon.

"Fool!" he snarled. "Step out of the way this instant, or I'll kill both of you." Once more the pistol rose in his hand.

Very calmly, while Cole marveled at his audacity, Latham took a case from his pocket and with ostentatious serenity lighted a cigarette.

"Fire away," he said coolly, folding his arms across his chest and smoking with an air of perfect content.

Carmody regarded him with a baleful glare, then abruptly changed his mind and started backing toward the door. He slammed it behind him with unnecessary vigor, and they heard the bolt slide in the lock. Latham flung away his cigarette.

"Whew!" he exclaimed. "That was fairly exciting. I didn't like the way Carmody looked when he left us, though. The old rat has something up his sleeve."

Cole nodded, wondering at the meaning of the professor's hasty exit. "Our only hope is to spar for time, and we have been fairly successful so far," he remarked. "That was a neat maneuver, Latham."

"It was splendid!" exclaimed the girl, and Cole

noted a new expression in her wide, lustrous eyes as she fixed them on the physician. "But you mustn't do it again," she added firmly. "He might shoot next time."

"How is the foot?" inquired Latham.

"Better—much better. I think I can step down on it now."

"You had better not try as yet," said the physician with a professional air. "Cole and I may challenge you to a foot race by and by, and you must preserve your energies."

She merely smiled at this, and again Cole noted the new, tender expression in her face. He was about to frame a remark, but just then the door opened. Two burly, hard-faced men, each with an automatic in his hand, entered the room.

"The big chief wants to see you," announced one of them. "This way." He pointed toward the open door.

Cole glanced narrowly at the weapon in his hand, then decided that at the present moment resistance would be worse than useless. There were other lives besides his own to be considered. Evidently the same thought had occurred to the doctor. After a moment's hesitation and an exchange of glances with Cole, he took the girl in his arms and carried her out followed by Cole.

One of the armed men, walking at the head of the little procession, opened the door.

"In there," he directed. "Step lively!"

He gave Cole an ungentle shove with his automatic, and the three prisoners walked through the door.

CHAPTER XXV

FACE TO FACE

COLE glanced about the room they had entered. Its sparse furnishings suggested that it had been arranged in haste. There were a desk and a telephone, hinting that it served as the executive office of the gold-mad crowd, also a few chairs, a huge steel safe, and a cot. The cluttered condition of the desk indicated that some one had recently been sitting there and would probably soon return. Cole's gaze rested longingly on the telephone, the only connecting link with the outside world.

Very gently Doctor Latham placed the girl in one of the chairs. As she looked up at him, her eyes were full of trust and gratitude.

The doctor turned to one of the armed guards at the door.

"Where is the benevolent gentleman whom you call the big chief?" he inquired.

"You'll see him soon enough," replied the man surlily.

"Good!" exclaimed Latham. "At last my curiosity shall be satisfied. We have a pretty good idea what he looks like—eh, Cole?"

"I think we do," said Cole, a smile tugging at his lips. "Once or twice before my suspicions turned in the direction of the man I have in mind, but something threw me off the track. Now I am almost sure."

Cole's next words were spoken in an undertone, too low for the girl to hear. "You realize what you are up against, don't you, Latham?"

"Against a bunch of cockeyed devils, of course."

"I had something more specific in mind. Professor Carmody has failed to bully us, so now the big chief himself is to have a try at it. You realize, of course, that he wouldn't allow himself to be seen by us unless——" He paused and looked gravely at the doctor.

"Yes, I understand," whispered Latham, throwing an uneasy glance at Miss Brownell. "He wouldn't show himself to us if he thought there was the slightest chance that we would ever tell tales about him. These scoundrels are planning to murder us, Cole."

"So it looks, but not until they have made one more effort to make you reveal the formula for the seventh ingredient."

There was a look of sad humor in the doctor's eyes. "And next time they will try harder. I'll keep up the bluff as long as I can. The seventh ingredient!" He chuckled grimly under his breath. "Like most humbugs, it sounds well."

Cole glanced expectantly toward the door. "A little while ago, out in the other room, when you stepped between Carmody's pistol and Miss Brownell, did you expect the professor would shoot?"

"I didn't know what to expect, to tell the truth."

"Well, I knew he wouldn't," said Cole emphatically. "While we are waiting, you might try to figure out the reason why. When you find it, file it away in your mind for future reference.

It may come in handy. We must stop this whispering. We are making Miss Brownell nervous."

A slight sound was heard in the corridor. The two armed guards stood aside, and then the door opened. A moment later, smiling thinly as he saw his suspicions confirmed, Cole faced the leader of the alchemists.

"Good evening, Mr. Englebreth," he said easily.

An attendant pushed the invalid's wheel chair up to the desk. Englebreth, his disproportionately broad shoulders slightly hunched, looked about the room with a rather listless expression. He was as white-faced as ever, and his pale, washed-out eyes showed little animation, but a faintly sinister smile played about the long, thin lips. In his hand was a pistol with which he toyed with apparent carelessness.

He nodded at Cole, then, with a quick motion of his long, slim fingers, dismissed his attendant. The door closed, and the two armed guards stood in front of it. For a while no one spoke. A hush seemed to have descended over the little group with the invalid's entrance. Latham regarded him intently, but without a sign of surprise. For a moment Englebreth's pale eyes rested on Miss Brownell, then he glanced at the doctor, and finally at Cole. His forehead puckered a little.

"You do not seem surprised to see me," he remarked petulantly, as if disappointed that his entrance had created no sensation.

"Why should I be?" Cole asked.

"Surely you didn't suspect until now that I was connected with the enterprise on foot here?"

"On the contrary," said Cole, "your entrance has only confirmed the suspicions that have been running in and out of my head for the past two days. They began when I saw you enter the offices of the Bureau of Civic Research. They received a setback when I learned that the letters you left on the desk were genuine."

Englebreth seemed mildly amused. "I am a public-spirited man," he declared. "The Bureau of Civic Research is one of the numerous praiseworthy activities I am interested in. Being one of its honorary vice presidents I have free access to its headquarters, of course. When I learned, quite by accident, that a certain mysterious organization, located on the top floor of the building, was resisting my plans, then this privilege stood me in good stead. You might have guessed, Cole, that I left those letters for a blind, just to show any casual visitor that everything was open and aboveboard."

"I might," said Cole dryly.

"Yet you have proven yourself a very fair guesser, I must say. You are a clever fellow, Cole. The Unknown Seven didn't become really dangerous to us until you took charge of its activities. Not that you have accomplished anything," he added with a dry chuckle. "We are too strong even for you."

Cole received the compliment with a shrug. A silence fell between them. In the stillness the rhythmic humming of machinery was distinctly heard. In Cole's ears it sounded like a pæan of gold. He looked deep into Englebreth's pale eyes. There was a queer flicker in the depths, an ex-

pression of insatiable greed to which the subterranean whir and throw was but the audible accompaniment. He had seen the same expression in Reeves' burning orbs and also in the eyes of Carmody and Ballinger. There was something abysmal about it. It suggested one who, having gazed too long on visions of great wealth, had become enslaved to a fearful obsession.

"Yes, you are very clever," Englebreth went on. "It did not occur to me that any one might suspect what the safe contained, but evidently you did. You followed the yacht, of course. It was a very ingenious move, Cole. Without doing so you would never have located our establishment here. Now that you are here what do you propose to do?"

Cole only smiled. Again he looked deep into Englebreth's eyes and saw the smoldering fires of the fever of gold.

"My wife is an admirer of yours, Cole," the invalid went on. "When her brother disappeard she insisted that I engage you to find him. Of course I couldn't very well refuse. It would have looked suspicious, and, besides, I supposed you were harmless. When I saw that you were about to learn too much, through your connection with me, I succeeded in persuading my wife that you were not worthy of confidence, that it was best to dismiss you. Again I ask you what you intend to do."

The words sounded like a taunt. Again Cole slanted a glance at the telephone. The instrument tantalized him. He noticed that the green cord attached to its base was of generous length. His mind worked quickly, but the sight of the three

automatics baffled him. A sudden move would mean instant death, not only for himself, but for his two companions as well.

"You seem irresolute," Englebreth observed. "And no wonder, Cole. For once in your life, you are absolutely helpless. You have been entirely too meddlesome, and people who meddle in others' affairs usually get into trouble. Listen!"

Cole listened. A faint smile played about Englebreth's lips as the whirring of machinery sounded clearly in the surrounding silence.

"Know what it means, Cole. It means gold! Gold!" His lips seemed to caress the word. "Millions and millions and millions, Cole. After you are gone we shall be turning out gold in unlimited quantities. I and my associates shall be the richest men in the world. And you, poor worm, who thought you could stop us, will be reduced to a few grains of dust."

"Sure of that?" demanded Cole.

His tone, clear and confident, seemed to impress the invalid.

"Why do you ask? Surely you don't expect to escape from your present predicament. As it happens, all the members of my organization are here to-night. A touch of my finger will summon twenty men to my assistance, if necessary."

He scanned Cole's face for a sign of fear, but none came. The other's coolness seemed to nettle him.

"So the gang is all here," said Cole carelessly. "That means, of course, that Doctor Ballinger is included?"

"Naturally. An excellent man, Ballinger. He has a practical mind, and he knows on which side his bread is buttered. Why do you ask?"

"I am glad he is here," said Cole. "I wouldn't want him to get away from me, you know."

The invalid leaned out of the chair and stared. "Get away?" he echoed. "What do you mean?"

"I have a particular score to settle with Ballinger," said Cole calmly. "Naturally I want him present when I hand you and your gang over to the police."

"When you——" Englebreth was utterly astounded. "If you think this is a joking matter——"

"I was never more serious in my life, Englebreth. Before daybreak I expect to hand every mother's son of you over to the authorities."

Englebreth stared for a moment longer; then he laughed hoarsely. Cole could see that his cool insolence had exerted the intended moral effect. The invalid, though the advantage was all on his side, felt just a trifle ill at ease. Cole's demeanor was well calculated to suggest that a surprise of some sort was forthcoming. Englebreth would not have been human if he had failed to be impressed by the airy assurance of one whom he thought wholly at his mercy.

Finally he shrugged. "You must be mad," he muttered. Then he faced Latham, who stood beside the chair in which Miss Brownell sat. "I have something to say to you, doctor. You did us a service once, and that is something I never forget. If you will——"

"Save your breath," interrupted Latham con-

temptuously. "For a time, a little while ago, I was tempted to enter into negotiations with you, but Miss Brownell wouldn't hear of it. What is a mere man to do when a woman sets her foot down?"

"Your flippancy is ill-timed," said Englebreth austerely.

"Hasn't one a right to joke at one's own funeral?"

"We shall see." Englebreth's lips tightened ominously. "You know what we want from you, doctor. Only a formula that by right belongs to us, since you worked it out while you were a member of this organization. Produce it, and I promise to be lenient with you and Miss Brownell. Unless my senses deceive me"—and Englebreth smiled craftily—"you are very anxious that nothing unpleasant shall happen to her."

Latham hesitated, impressed by the cruel smile on the invalid's lips, and the girl answered in his place.

"Doctor Latham's answer is *no,*" she declared emphatically.

Englebreth regarded her curiously, with an odd mingling of admiration and malice. "You are a stubborn young person," he muttered. "For the last time, doctor, I ask you if you will consent to my terms."

Again it was Miss Brownell who answered. "Doctor Latham refuses," she declared. "He knows that your promises are worthless, that you intend to kill us regardless of whether or not he grants your request. I don't think there is anything further to be said."

"No?" Englebreth's thin fingers seemed to tighten around the pistol. "Perhaps I can convince you——"

He stopped short. A squeallike cry of astonishment escaped him, for Cole had just done a very unexpected thing. It was so unexpected, in fact, that it seemed like the act of a person whose reason was tottering. With arms folded across his chest he had casually approached the chair in which Miss Brownell sat. For a time he had seemed absorbed in deep thought, but all the while he had been scheming how he might divert Englebreth's attention, even if only for a moment, from the menacing pistol in his hand. Anything of a startling nature, the more bizarre and ludicrous the better, would serve his purpose. Now he turned suddenly and gave the girl a resounding slap on the cheek. He followed it up with another, then with a third.

A spell seemed to fall over the gathering. They had witnessed an act, in itself trivial and ridiculous, that staggered their reason by its sheer fatuity. For a measured moment their minds were at a standstill. That was exactly what Cole had intended, and a moment was all he needed. He had acted on a fugitive inspiration at a time when all seemed lost, when a move of a more rational nature would only have hastened the inevitable.

The resounding smack of the third blow had scarcely drifted out on the silence when he leaped at the invalid's chair. In an instant, while the minds of Englebreth and the two guards at the door were still dazed from contemplation of a

thing so bizarre, he had snatched the pistol from the cripple's hand. A moment later he was crouching low behind Englebreth's chair, pressing the muzzle of the weapon against his back.

He thrilled inwardly. Once more his mind had triumphed over a critical situation. The other time had been when he faced Professor Carmody in the Bureau of Civic Research. The professor had been thrown off his mental base by a trick just as simple and effective.

"Tell your men to drop their weapons," he commanded, the muzzle of the pistol prodding Englebreth's back. "I'll give you exactly ten seconds. Unless you obey, you will be a dead man."

Englebreth squirmed in the chair, evidently in a state of great terror. In a few minutes his angle mind might reassert itself, but just now he was merely a shivering wreck. His trembling hand went up and made a signal to his men just as Cole was about to call time. Habitually obedient to the master will, the men at the door dropped their pistols.

Cole rose from his crouching position behind Englebreth's chair. Latham and the girl stared at him bewilderedly, the latter moving her hand dazedly over the cheek that Cole had struck, both seemingly unable to realize as yet what had happened. Englebreth was breathing raspingly. The two guards at the door gazed dully at the erect figure behind the invalid's chair.

"Pick up those pistols, Latham," said Cole quietly. "Pardon my rudeness, Miss Brownell. It was necessary."

She smiled uncertainly, evidently beginning to un-

derstand. It was several moments before the physician could shake off his stupefaction. He moved haltingly over the floor and dazedly took possession of the pistols.

"It was magnificent, Mr. Cole!" murmured the girl, at last grasping the psychological stratagem by which Cole had reversed the situation.

"But if I hadn't seen it happen, I would have sworn it couldn't be done," said Latham.

Cole's face was grave. His ruse had only averted their immediate danger. Any moment other members of the organization might pour into the room, crushing them by superior numbers. Every second counted now. Holding the pistol in one hand, Cole drew the telephone to him and spoke a number in the transmitter. Only a few words would be needed to make Carlin understand the situation, and within an hour reinforcements would arrive. He wondered, as he waited for his connection, if they could hold out until then. Impatiently he jigged the hook, muttering heartfelt imprecations upon the state of the rural telephone service, and then, in a twinkling, something happened.

He saw the cripple's weazened hand move stealthily along the side of the desk, became conscious that a heretofore unnoticed door had burst open behind him, heard the girl's quick, startled cry, saw the light blotted out as if a pall had suddenly dropped over the little room, felt a stinging blow at the back of the head, and, with Englebreth's diabolic chuckles dinning in his ears, fell to the floor.

CHAPTER XXVI

A CRY

GOLD! Gold!" The vibrant murmurs, edged with a triumphant and sinister note, echoed in Cole's ears as he opened his eyes. The house was shivering with a slow, rhythmic tremor, a throbbing pulsation that instantly begun to pierce the fog in his mind.

From his recumbent position on the floor he struggled to a sitting posture. Lifting his head, he listened to the grimly exultant pæan rising from the bowels of the earth.

"Feeling better?" asked a voice which he vaguely recognized at Doctor Latham's.

Cole did not answer. The subterranean vibrations seemed to cast a spell over his awakening senses.

"Hear it?" he asked at length.

"Hear what?"

"This infernal hymn of gold. It will drive me crazy if I have to listen to it much longer."

"Then don't listen. Know what time it is?"

Cole shook his head as if to indicate that the matter was of absolutely no importance.

"Precisely twelve o'clock," said the doctor, and Cole heard something resembling the snapping of a watch lid. "You have been unconscious for something like ten hours. That was the second knockout in a night, Cole. Why can't these scoundrels show a little versatility?"

"What happened?" asked Cole dully.

"As if that mattered now! Englebreth gave a signal of some sort, and the next thing I knew about half a dozen of his hired thugs swooped down on us. My recollections cease at that point."

"Where are we?"

"In the same room we occupied last night, before we were ushered into Englebreth's august presence. The windows are just as tightly shuttered as they were then, and the door is just as impregnable. I wonder if these hounds mean to let us starve to death."

Cole looked about him. An electric light was burning dimly over their heads. Through a narrow rift in one of the shutters came a shaft of sunlight, gilding the dust in the stale air.

"Where is Miss Brownell?" he asked abruptly.

Wish I knew," muttered the doctor. Of a sudden all the levity had died out of his voice. "You and I were alone in this room when I came to. If these rats harm a single hair on her head——" The threat died unfinished in a groan.

With difficulty Cole rose to his feet and leaned against the wall.

"I don't seem to remember just where we were at," he mumbled.

"You gave Miss Brownell a slap on the cheek," the doctor reminded him. "It was a brilliant idea, Cole."

"So it was—but it failed, as I remember," Cole muttered grimly. "What was the situation just before that?"

"Englebreth was doing his level best to bluff me into revealing the formula of the mythical seventh

ingredient. Perhaps you remember his sportsmanlike proposition. I was to give him the formula in return for my life."

"He would promptly kill you the moment you surrendered the formula," Cole pointed out.

"Without a doubt. He would kill all three of us. But, as it happens, I can't give him the formula, because it doesn't exist."

"But as long as he thinks it does, we are holding a trump card in reserve," said Cole, regaining his grip on the tangled threads of the situation.

"If only we knew how to use it!"

"We'll find a way," said Cole confidently, dragging himself to a chair at one side of the room. "Anything about your person that could be used as a weapon in an emergency?"

"Not a thing. I am plucked clean."

"So am I," said Cole after a hasty survey of his pockets. "No, here is a stick pin. They seem to have overlooked that. The pin is long and sharp. You could pierce a person's jugular vein with an implement of this kind, couldn't you, doctor?"

"If you knew exactly where to strike."

"You do, of course, being a doctor. As a weapon it would be useless in my hand, so I will transfer it to you. I suggest you conceal it under the lapel of your coat."

Puzzled, Latham took the ornament and did as Cole had directed. As he hid it under his lapel, he seemed inclined to ask a question, but Cole forestalled him.

"I think some one is coming," he remarked in an undertone.

Latham, listening, heard the sounds which Cole's keener ears had caught first. Folding his arms across his chest, he struck a carefree pose and looked toward the door. It opened, and two armed stalwarts walked in. They were followed by Englebreth in his wheel chair. Two more guards, also armed, brought up the rear. With a cautious look to all sides, the invalid trundled his wheel chair into the center of the room. The barrel of a small automatic gleamed viciously in the electric light.

"How do you do, gentlemen?" he said in tones of mock geniality. "Wish I could offer you some breakfast, but it has been my experience that people are always more reasonable when their stomachs are empty. I have come to renew our discussion where we left off last night." He fixed his bleak and very alert eyes on Doctor Latham.

"Better save your breath," suggested the physician. "You may need it before we are through with you."

Englebreth smiled serenely. "I don't blame you, doctor, for trying to bolster up your courage. People usually resort to false bravado when they are hopelessly situated. Our friend Cole enacted quite a spectacular scene last night, but he will hardly try anything like that again. He has learned his lesson. Well, doctor, are you ready to oblige us?"

"If you will drop that automatic, I'll oblige you with a smash on the jaw," said the physician in unprofessional but impressive language.

"Still stubborn, I see." His smile took on a sinister quality. "I suppose you are wondering what has become of Miss Brownell?"

The doctor bit his lip, but his gaze did not waver. "If anything happens to Miss Brownell," he muttered hotly, "I'll choke you to death with my bare hands."

"Save your threats, doctor. They don't interest me in the least. As yet nothing whatever has happened to Miss Brownell, but something will unless you adopt a more reasonable attitude. I warn you that it will be something decidedly unpleasant." He turned slightly in the chair and addressed one of his bodyguards. "Ask Doctor Ballinger to step in here."

The man nodded and left the room. A questioning glance passed between Latham and Cole, the former looking as if a dread suspicion had suddenly occurred to him. In a few moments the messenger returned with Ballinger. The physician strode in with a jaunty air and saluted Cole and Latham with exaggerated politeness.

"Ah, Ballinger," said the cripple in an undertone, yet loud enough for the two prisoners to hear, "I just wished to make certain that you have made all necessary arrangements for the—ahem—experiment we discussed last night."

Cole, casting a sidelong glance at Latham, saw him stiffen suddenly. A film of pallor spread above the bearded portion of his face.

"Yes, everything is ready," announced Ballinger.

"The instruments came?"

"Just a little while ago."

"And the ether?"

"It is here too."

"Good, Ballinger. Be ready to proceed the moment you hear from me." He waved a withered hand in dismissal.

Ballinger, an inscrutable smile playing about his lips, left the room. An intense silence followed. The cripple's gelid gaze moved from Latham to Cole, and then back to Latham.

"You understood?" he asked.

Neither man answered. A harrowing suspicion seemed to have come over both of them. Latham looked as if his powerful body was racked by an agonizing dread.

"Ballinger is a very clever man," murmured the invalid. "You know what happened to Malcolm Reeves." He paused, looked stonily at Doctor Latham, as if waiting for his last words to produce their utmost effect. "The same thing," he added slowly, measuring each word, "will happen to Miss Brownell unless you change your mind, Latham."

A cry of mingled horror, loathing and hate broke from Latham's compressed lips. He sprang toward the cripple, hand raised as if to strike, but in an instant two of the bodyguards intervened.

"Glad we understand each other, Latham," said the cripple calmly. "The operation will start in fifteen minutes unless you submit to my terms."

Latham stood speechless. The only sound heard in the room was a great sigh.

"Don't like the idea, eh, Latham?" the invalid went on in smooth, dulcet tones. "The spectacle

of Miss Brownell reduced to a gibbering lunatic is a little too much for your imagination to dwell on. You have a vivid recollection of what happened to Reeves."

A dull, hoarse groan sounded in the physician's chest. Cole, watching him, thought he was about to give way under an overwhelming strain.

"You're mistaken, Englebreth," he managed to say. "There is no such thing as the seventh ingredient. I let you go on thinking so because——"

Englebreth interrupted with a wave of his hand. "I expected you to say that. It would be your logical evasion. You can't deceive me with such nonsense. Only last night you discussed the possibilities of the seventh ingredient with Professor Carmody. As he explained it to me, it's a sort of electronic reaction. Not being a scientific man, I don't understand what that means, but it doesn't matter. I have the utmost respect for your scientific achievements, doctor. Will you give us the formula?"

Latham fumbled in vain for a convincing argument. His advantage had not only slipped away from him, but it had become a deadly boomerang in Englebreth's hand.

"I swear I am telling you the truth!" he cried brokenly.

A cold smile curled the cripple's lips. "Such childish subterfuge doesn't go with me," he said contemptuously. "Either you give me the formula instantly, or Miss Brownell will be a lunatic inside of an hour. Take your choice."

He leaned back in the chair, slowly and playfully

twisting the automatic in his hand. Cole stepped forward.

"Latham has told you the truth," he declared. "The seventh ingredient never existed outside of his imagination."

Englebreth shrugged with an air of utter incredulity. Cole could see that there was no way of disturbing his firmly rooted belief. And he knew that, even if the seventh ingredient had been a reality, Latham's submission would not have altered their situation.

Englebreth looked at his watch, then summoned one of his bodyguards and whispered something in his ear. The man left the room. The slamming of the door sounded like a death knell in the tense silence. Latham's chest heaved in a frenzy of suppressed emotions. Minutes passed, and then hurried footsteps sounded overhead, accompanied by the sound of a resisting body being dragged over the floor. Latham, with a wild look in his face, started forward, but one of the guards shoved him back. Breathing fast and raspingly he swayed unsteadily on his feet. Of a sudden he gave a violent start, then stood as if frozen into immobility. From the room above came a long cry of terror, uttered in a woman's voice.

Latham's bulging eyes stared upward. There was a look of insanity in his face.

"Stop it!" he cried hoarsely. "For God's sake——"

Another cry, more poignant than the others, shrilled through the house.

"Stop it—you fiend!" cried Latham.

"I will, on one condition," said Englebreth calmly. "There is still time. They are only making preparations upstairs. She won't cry when the real business begins."

Latham's hand went to his eyes as if to exclude a hideous vision.

"Careful, Englebreth!" said Cole evenly. "If you go too far, Latham may lose his mind."

"And if he does, what then?" demanded the cripple jeeringly.

"A number of things may happen." Cole gave the physician a level, significant glance. "For instance, Latham may take it into his head to kill himself."

The physician's head went up. His hands left his face. A look of dawning comprehension crept into his features. He turned his head and for an instant his eyes met Cole's, reading a message there.

"Kill himself?" echoed the cripple, astonished. "What rot, Cole! How would he do it, and why?"

"Ask him," said Cole with a careless gesture. "I can only point out to you that if he kills himself the secret of the seventh ingredient dies with him. Look! He is——"

He simulated a cry of astonishment and horror. Latham, quickly interpreting the message he had read in Cole's eyes, had snatched the stick pin from under the lapel of his coat.

"Watch me, Englebreth," he declared in a voice that had suddenly retrieved all its lost vigor. "Even a stick pin makes quite a formidable weapon if it's pointed in the right direction. I am pointing this one straight at my jugular vein. The moment

anybody in this room makes a move, I drive it in. Where will your seventh ingredient be then, Englebreth?"

The cripple stared at him in speechless bafflement. He raised a hand, but it fell limply to his side.

"You—you're crazy!" he stuttered.

"Maybe," said Latham coolly.

"Or else you are only bluffing." There was a trace of doubt in Englebreth's tones.

"Why should I be bluffing? I would rather kill myself than be killed by your bunch of hyenas. I know you meant to kill me, anyway, Englebreth. One thing is certain. Unless you stop the preparations upstairs within the next sixty seconds, your last hope of obtaining that formula will be gone. You can't get anything out of a dead man."

Englebreth strained forward in his chair, staring into the physician's grim, determined face.

"He means what he says," Cole declared, smiling despite the tension of the moment. "You will have to act quickly, Englebreth."

The cripple considered a moment longer, then bawled an order to one of the men at the door. The fellow hurried away, and in a moment they heard him scurrying up the stairs. An exchange of words sounded overhead, then all was quiet.

Englebreth made an impatient gesture with his hand. The bodyguard closed in around him, and with petulant motions he wheeled himself out of the room. At the door he turned his head for a moment, and a little chill rippled down Cole's back as he saw the cold, malignant look in the cripple's eye.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE WAY OUT

DOCTOR LATHAM stroked his beard thoughtfully as the door closed behind the invalid and his retinue. "It worked like magic," he remarked.

"It worked," Cole amplified, "because we were dealing with a logical mind, one that deals mainly with reason and fails to consider the human equation. We know that Englebreth means to kill us in the end, and he knows that we know it. That being the case, it wasn't hard for him to put himself in your place a little while ago. He would have done what you threatened to do, because it was the logical move under the circumstances. I wonder what deviltry Englebreth will be planning next."

"A seven-course dinner, I hope," said the doctor wistfully. "I'm famished."

Cole regarded him musingly, marveling at the resiliency of his spirits. Latham appeared to have shaken off all external cares the moment he saw that Miss Brownell was no longer in immediate danger.

"You might as well restrain your appetite, doctor," he murmured. "You heard what Englebreth said, that a man is most amenable to argument when he is hungry. At any rate, it is worth something to know that he doesn't want you to die just yet. He showed that plainly when you made that monumental bluff with the stick pin. I saw him turn white as a ghost."

"Thanks to the seventh ingredient," said Latham

with a chuckle. "It's the best kind of life insurance, but I fear it won't last long. Any more tricks in your repertory, Cole?"

"One more, I think." Cole glanced toward the shadowy corner where he had stood during Englebreth's presence in the room. "I understand," he went on casually, "that Dutchess Point was once a very gay place."

"If so, its gayety hasn't improved with age."

Cole ignored his flippancy. "I've been told it was once a notorious gambling resort. Places of that kind are usually equipped with contrivances for making hasty exits—trapdoors, sliding panels and that sort of thing."

Latham raised his brows. "What are you getting at?"

But Cole seemed in no hurry to approach his subject. "Ever notice, Latham, that many people find it very hard to remain motionless when they are in a state of deep mental concentration? Physical movement of some sort seems a necessary relief from mental effort. One man I know is always plucking at his watch chain when he is absorbed in some mental task. Another taps his desk with a pencil. My own favorite diversion on such occasions is to beat a tattoo with my knuckles."

"Highly interesting," remarked Latham, "but I fail to see the point. It is either very shallow or very deep."

"Neither, Latham. A little while ago, while you were enacting that highly dramatic scene for Englebreth's benefit, I stood back there in the corner, with my hands behind my back, tapping the wall

with my knuckles. No one noticed me, for you held the attention of everybody in the room. I didn't realize what I was doing myself until suddenly I became aware that my knuckles were producing a hollow sound."

Doctor Latham gasped. "You mean that——"

"We shall see," said Cole; and in an instant he was back in the corner, crouching low while his knuckles hammered the wall, each tap producing a dull, hollow sound. The doctor, visibly excited, stood behind him, watching every move he made. Cole continued the tapping until he had determined the boundaries of the hollow space, extending about five feet from the corner, and then he got down on his knees and ran his hands along the beveled joint between wall and floor. A little cry of elation escaped him as his fingers encountered a small protuberance. Almost instantly a portion of the wall turned back as if swinging on a central pivot. In front of them extended a long, dark hall.

"Great!" exclaimed Latham, his voice shaking a little. "You deserve a harp and a halo, Cole. Now let's make the hasty exit you spoke of."

He pressed forward, but Cole pulled him back. "I don't want a harp and a halo just yet," he declared, "and that's why we are going to stay in this room a while longer. You forget that it's still broad daylight outside. If we went out now, we would doubtless run into one of Englebreth's sluggers. We must wait till dark."

Latham groaned as Cole closed the opening. He glanced at his watch. "Only half past three. That means a wait of several hours."

"I know. That will give us ample time to lay our plans. Don't forget that we are both unarmed, and that we'll cut a sorry figure if we should be caught. We don't want to waste the only advantage we have."

"You are right, of course," admitted the doctor. "What do you suggest?"

Cole reflected. "It isn't likely Englebreth knows anything about the hidden exit. If he did, he would have chosen a different cell for us. We'll treat him to a little surprise after dark, Latham. Its exact nature will be determined by whatever developments come along in the meantime."

"Wish they would hurry," mumbled the doctor, all impatience now that a way out had been found. He sat down, lighted a cigarette, and made ostentatious efforts to compose himself for a wait. An hour dragged by. The beam of light coming through the narrow rift in the shutter grew thin and pale. Another hour passed, and it disappeared altogether. Latham got up and began pacing the floor with long, lunging strides. For a long time not a word had been uttered between the two men.

"Isn't it about time to make a move?" asked Latham suddenly.

Cole started. The subterranean pulsations, sounding clear and exultant in the stillness, had cast a spell over his senses. Now he looked at his watch in the light of the electric bulb overhead.

"Better wait another hour," he suggested.

Doctor Latham swore under his breath, then lighted another cigarette.

"Queer we haven't heard from Englebreth," Cole

remarked. "I expected another call from him before dark."

"He is probably meditating over his next move. I imagine he is planning a very brilliant stroke. But we'll checkmate him, eh, Cole?"

Latham's impatience was beginning to communicate itself to Cole. He took his watch from his pocket, and in the same instant a noise sounded outside the door. In a moment it opened, and two huskies, with leveled automatics, appeared in the room.

"Miss Brownell wants you," announced one of them, addressing Doctor Latham.

The physician, evidently in a quandary, looked questioningly at Cole. For only a moment Cole hesitated. Doubtless the summons meant that Englebreth was trying a new mode of attack and that the reference to Miss Brownell was only a subterfuge.

Cole nodded in response to the physician's unspoken question. "If Miss Brownell wants you, you must go to her," he declared, conscious that one of the guards was watching him intently. In an undertone he added: "If you get into a pinch, keep stalling till I show up."

Latham nodded and walked out, accompanied by the two gangsters. Cole watched him until the door closed behind him.

"Wonder what Englebreth is up to this time," he muttered; and then, moving quickly, he stepped into the corner and, opening the hidden door, stepped out into the dark hall beyond.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE ENEMY STRIKES

SILENT as a shadow, Cole hurried down the hall, which seemed to extend endlessly in an undeviating direction. Believing it had once been used as an emergency exit he supposed it would eventually lead into the open. He had made no plans beyond the immediate present, but it was his intention to join Doctor Latham as soon as possible and, taking advantage of the sensation his unexpected appearance would create, make the most of his opportunity. Beyond doubt the physician was in desperate danger. The murderous glance Englebreth had thrown over his shoulder as he left them a few hours ago had left an ominous imprint on Cole's mind.

Soon he brought up against an obstruction, apparently a blank stretch of wall. He fumbled with his hands along the surface expecting to find a contrivance similar to the one at the other end of the wall. Soon his fingers encountered the little knob at the bottom which told him his surmise had been correct. Cautiously he pressed outward and the obstruction gave. A breath of cool night air fanned his face as he stepped out.

Hugging close to the wall he looked about him. Evidently he was in the rear of the house, in a wide recess formed by two projecting wings. Above him and to the sides were several lighted windows,

while ahead of him was a sloping, rock-strewn stretch of landscape. Carefully picking his way, he stepped along the nearest wall, all his senses on the alert against an interruption. He reached the corner, looked around the edge of the wall, and then drew back. A stalwart individual, evidently one of Englebreth's lookouts, was coming toward him.

Cole shrank back against the wall, waited until the man rounded the corner, then swung out with his right hand and landed a smashing blow on the fellow's jaw. Without a sound the sentry dropped to the ground, and Cole dragged him into the shadows along the wall. It took him but a few moments to undo the man's shoe laces and secure his hands and feet. Next he ripped out the lining from his coat, folded it into a narrow strip, and firmly applied it as a gag. Last of all he extracted an automatic from the unconscious man's hip pocket.

"I'm in luck so far," he told himself, making certain that the weapon was loaded before he continued his interrupted progress. He breathed more easily now, for the possession of a firearm had a soothing effect on his nerves. He crawled forward along the wall, exercising infinite care, until he reached a window in the wing. It was dark, and no sound came from within, signifying that this part of the building was not used by the gang. He placed his elbow against the pane, pressing firmly until the glass cracked. Dislodging several of the splinters, he pushed a hand through the opening and released the catch. In a moment he was inside and began to pick his way cautiously across the floor. At the farther side he opened a door, traversed another

dark and deserted room, then still another. Soon he found himself in a hall, and after a glance up and down its length selected a door at random. The moment he stepped inside voices reached his ears. Along the side, diagonally across the floor from where he stood, a narrow streak of light showed the location of the door.

He tiptoed across the floor, placed his hand on the knob, turned it carefully, and opened the door an infinitesimal crack. In an instant he recognized the room. It was the office that had been the scene of his short-lived triumph the night before. Englebreth was seated at the desk, occupying the same wheel chair in which he had sat while witnessing Cole's abortive ruse. The door before which Cole now stood was the one that had so abruptly opened while he was on the point of telephoning Carlin. He was vaguely aware that the scene had changed since last night, but he had no time to observe details. His attention was instantly engrossed by the little drama taking place before his eyes.

On a cot placed along the farther side of the room lay Latham, and, save for an occasional turn of the head, he lay so still that Cole, although he could not see distinctly, guessed that he must be strapped to the cot. Over him, bending slightly, with a wicked smile playing about his bearded lips, stood Doctor Ballinger, and in his hand was a small object which Cole could not distinguish. The only other occupants of the room were Englebreth and two of the stalwart bodyguards who always seemed to be hovering about him.

"Yes, it was clever, Latham," the cripple was saying. "You played your cards just right. Whether you were serious or whether you were bluffing is beside the point. Your death would have been ill-timed from my point of view. I don't think you are afraid to die, Latham. There is one thing you are afraid of, however."

He stopped. For several moments the room was very still. Ballinger, straightening his back, looked meditatively at the object in his hand, which, as Cole now perceived, was a small bottle.

"That one thing is blindness, Latham," added the cripple impressively. "Tell him, Ballinger."

Ballinger held the vial before the recumbent man's eyes. "One small particle of this fluid dropped into each of your eyes will blind you for life," he announced. "Not a pleasant thing to contemplate, eh, Latham?"

Cole started as he saw the diabolical form of persuasion that was being employed by the conspirators to make Latham reveal what he was supposed to know. It was a threat far more hideous than death itself. He saw Latham's chest heave upward as he strained against the fetters that held him to the cot.

"What do you say, Latham?" asked the cripple, bending slightly out of his chair.

"I'll say that you and Ballinger are a pair of scurvy blackguards," was the physician's retort. "I take solemn oath that I will send each of you to jail with a black eye."

Ballinger laughed derisively.

"Still stubborn, I see," Englebreth remarked. "I

am warning you for the last time, Latham. If you think Cole can come to your rescue, you are mistaken. Between you and me, that infernal meddler will never leave Dutchess Point alive. With you it is different. You can make yourself useful to us, and that is why I am offering you terms. But you must decide quickly."

"Go to blazes!" said Latham, but there was a catch in his voice, scarcely audible even to Cole's keen ears, which told that his courage was faltering.

"He thinks we are bluffing, Ballinger," said Englebreth. "We must convince him that we are serious. Drop a little of the fluid into his left eye. The result will prove to him that we mean business."

A muffled groan came from the man on the cot. Ballinger stepped closer to the light, uncorked the little vial, cautiously inserted a small syringe through the neck, his brows contracting as he pumped the requisite amount of fluid into the glass tube. Now he set the bottle down, replaced the cork, and with the syringe in his hand turned again toward the man on the cot. A faint grin hovered about his bearded lips, but he had taken only a step in the direction of the cot when a sharp command rang out:

"Stop Ballinger!"

As he spoke, Cole sprang forward and landed a vigorous blow with his automatic on the right hand of the guard standing nearest to Englebreth. A pistol dropped from the man's limp fingers, and with an instantaneous movement Cole picked it up.

Ballinger jerked up his head, then stopped dead in his tracks, facing the cot. The cripple whirled round in his swivel chair, a look of utter consternation flooding his white face as he saw Cole, standing calmly a foot away, a leveled automatic in each hand. The second guard leaped forward, but in a moment Cole had him covered.

"Drop that gun!" he ordered, making an ominous gesture with one of his pistols. "This instant!"

The man's jaw sagged, and the weapon dropped from his hand. Englebreth, sitting hunched and shuddering in his chair, stared at the intruder as if he were seeing a specter.

"You!" he exclaimed in a thin, rasping voice. "You——"

Cole ignored him. His eyes gleamed like points of polished steel. "Ballinger," he said in a very calm voice, "I'd rather put a bullet through your black heart, but I'm going to give you one chance for your life. See how quickly you can cut Doctor Latham loose. A little speed may save your life."

The syringe fell from Ballinger's trembling fingers. For a moment he hesitated, then a knife appeared in his hand, and with surprising speed he slashed the cords around Latham's hands and feet. A little dazedly the physician rose from the cot. There was a dull, smoldering fever in his eyes as he looked at Ballinger. With startling suddenness his right hand shot out, landing a vicious blow between Ballinger's eyes.

"There—I promised you that!" he exclaimed grittily. "And you!"

Again his powerful fist darted out, and a splash

of crimson spurted from the region of Englebreth's nose. With a sigh of vast content he looked at Cole.

"How in the world did you——"

"Never mind," Cole interrupted. "Get Carlin on the telephone." As the physician started to obey, his cold, narrowing gaze, swept each face in the room. "I'll shoot the moment any one moves or makes a sound," he declared.

His voice had a ruthless ring, and no one moved. Englebreth, breathing raspingly, was wiping the blood from his face while he squinted at Cole in a dazed way.

The physician hung up the receiver and stepped away from the telephone.

"I got Carlin out of bed," he reported. "He will be here in a little while, and he will bring enough men with him to surround the place. These human hyenas will soon be where they belong." He looked about him with a satisfied expression. "I hope Carlin won't treat the speed regulations too tenderly. I'm hungry as the deuce."

"So am I," admitted Cole, a trifle absently. The throbbing and pulsing of machinery sounded remotely in his ears, a muffled hymn of greed and gold-maddened dreams, soon to be silenced forever. He shrugged, and a look of fretful responsibility came into his face. "And there is Toots," he went on. "I've been neglecting Toots lately. Latham, I'm going to give you a piece of advice, with the compliments of The Unknown Seven. Keep shy of cats."

THE END.